

**CHILDREN OF THE SLEEPING GIANT: SOCIAL ACTIVISM AMONG  
LATINO YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES**

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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December 2013

Major Subject: Sociology

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## **ABSTRACT**

Racialization, oppression, and resistance are key components of the United States' race relations. Consequently, social movements organized and led by youth of color represent the manifestation of resistance to social and political structures of power. The present thesis examines the activism of Latino/a youth in Southern California against House of Representatives Bill 4437, "The Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act," that took place in 2006. During this contentious context, youth activists organized protests, classroom discussions, and walkouts across the U.S., particularly in Southern California. Twenty-four participants of these events were interviewed in order to examine the conditions that led them to engage in social movement activism and how they understood race and racism within their organized resistance. Traditional and current social movement theories (i.e. political process theory), do not adequately explain the emergence of activism among Latino/a high school students whose political engagement is often sparked by their experiences with racial discrimination or anti-immigrant sentiment.

This research study addresses an existing gap in social movement theories by merging social movement theory with race-centered theories in order to contextualize and understand social movements led by youth of color within the U.S. racial system. The voices of participants represent critical epistemological frontiers as the study documents and examines their experiences and counter-frames. Counter narratives are

indicative of insurgent consciousness among racial minority movements in their challenges against authorities and official narratives.

The findings of this study demonstrate that student activists in Los Angeles and San Diego, California, had varying degrees of consciousness regarding the proposed immigration bill. This included views of H.R. 4437 as threatening to their families, community, as well as deeming the bill as a racialized political threat. Secondly, the findings also indicate that marginalization of communities of color continues to occur, as in this case, student activists' faced repression for making political claims. I conclude with a discussion of the significance of the 2006 youth movement, participants' reflections, and lessons participants took away as they matriculated into adulthood and some into the continuing movement for immigrants' rights.

## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to my mother, Maria Victoria Garcia, who from a young age taught me to speak out for those without a voice, to use my abilities to help others, and to remember where I come from. Over the years, I have come to truly understand these lessons and appreciate her wisdom. Thank you, mother.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Joe R. Feagin, and my committee members, Dr. Edward Murguia, Dr. Felipe Hinojosa, for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research.

Thank you to my friends, colleagues, and the department faculty and staff for making my time at Texas A&M University a great experience. My friends, compas, and mentors who taught me the meaning of shared struggle and critical thought: Luis M. Fuentes, David Flores, Helena Rodriguez, Benjamin Prado, David Rodrigues, Ron Gochez, Roberto Maciel, Christina Lares, Adela Lua, Itzel Garcia, Christian Ramirez, and Dr. Isidro Ortiz.

Finally, this thesis would not have been possible without the unwavering support and love of my wife, Juanita, my family, and my inspiration, my son, Edmundo Joaquín.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In December of 2005, the House of Representatives passed the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (H.R. 4437) with a vote of 239 to 192. H.R. 4437 sought to criminalize not only undocumented immigrants but also those who provided social assistance or services to undocumented immigrants (i.e. priests, social workers, nurses).<sup>1</sup> In the following weeks and months, immigrant rights organizations and activists organized massive mobilizations, including what came to be known as the *Gran Marcha*, with nearly one million people participating in Los Angeles, California, on March 25, 2006 (Loyd and Burrridge 2007). In the days following the historic *Gran Marcha*, cities and towns across the United States became hotbeds of activism, but this time, it was largely Latino youth taking the streets, discussing legislation, and experiencing a period of heightened political awareness.<sup>2</sup>

In Escondido, California, hundreds of Latino students staged walkouts from local high schools. Several of the groups of Latino youth marched to City Hall. among those

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<sup>1</sup> House of Representatives Bill 4437, “The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal

<sup>2</sup> Latino refers to a heterogeneous population of various cultural, ethnic, racial, and/or linguistic backgrounds tracing their origins to Latin America and can be used interchangeably to mean a female (Latina) or a male (Latino) actor, as well as various backgrounds. For the purposes of this study, I will use the term Latino generally, and specify in instances where detail regarding gender and/or national origin needs highlighting (e.g. Latina, Mexican).

participating was Cecilia, a 10<sup>th</sup> grader who lived in west Escondido and was bused to the city's only predominately white high school. Although Cecilia was born in the U.S., she carried a Mexican flag and a sign that read "Stop H.R. 4437." She came from a mixed-immigration-status family and was not only upset with what she saw as an unfair and racist legislation in House of Representative's Bill 4437, but also with the city of Escondido's own proposed bill, Ordinance No. 2006-38 R, which sought to order landlords to verify the legal status of tenants and prohibit undocumented people from renting within the city.<sup>3</sup> Upon arriving to City Hall, Cecilia, joined the masses of youth gathering, many of them also carried Mexican flags and signs to voice their disapproval of H.R. 4437.

Many of these newly born activists were participating in their first major act of resistance. As the Latino youth protest grew, so did the police presence. With emotions running high on this unprecedented day, students rallied in front of City Hall and the neighboring Grape Day Park. As police officers clad in riot gear moved in to "take control" and they called for students to disburse. By the end of this day, approximately two dozen youth participants were arrested by Escondido police officers. Some youth protesters even withstood physical force by police officers (e.g. slammed to the asphalt) and were placed in handcuffs.<sup>4</sup> School officials and authorities also attempted to discourage the activism by threatening students with suspensions and citations. However,

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<sup>3</sup>Bartolomeo, Kai. 2007. "Immigration and the Constitutionality of Local Self Help: Escondido's Undocumented Immigrant Rental Ban." *Review of Law. & Social Justice*.17: 855-887

<sup>4</sup> Fried, David. 2006. "More Than 1,250 North County Students Protest Immigration Bills." *San Diego Union Tribune*. March 28, 2006.

Cecilia, had made up her mind. She was going to protest, because the risk was “worth defending her family, her people.”

In my final year of my undergraduate career, I watched these events from both afar and first hand. The image of 5,000 thousand Latino students marching down Market Street, a major thoroughfare linking the mainly Mexican barrios to downtown San Diego, California, was forever imprinted in my mind. News reports and newspaper articles also showed thousands of Latino students across southern California and United States in acts of social resistance to H.R. 4437.

These youth activists and their actions were challenging the common racialized framing of youth of color, as criminals, truants, and uneducated. Furthermore, these young activists were confronting authorities, racial realities, and histories. Upon recognizing the significance of these events, I formed a research agenda to study what it means to be young, “brown,” and fighting for a cause in the United States. Although a small number of studies have been conducted to research Latino political activism (outside of conventional electoral politics), as well as the massive and highly organized (adult-led) immigration reform movements of 2006 (Martinez 2005; Hing and Johnson 2007; and Barreto et al. 2009), relatively few scholarly studies have explored the political activism of Latino youth (Getrich 2008; Velez et al. 2008). Even fewer studies have examined the experiences of race and racism within the decentralized and loosely organized student-led movement or how authorities (i.e. media, police, and school officials) have responded to youth of color protesting. This thesis aims to fill that existent research gap in social movement theory by asking two central questions:

- 1) Under what conditions do Mexican, Chicana/o, Latino, youth engage in social movement activism in the United States?
- 2) How did Latino youth understand racism and race in their organized resistance?

In order to study these questions, I chose to examine the 2006 student-led social movement in Southern California as a case study due to the region's widespread participation and history of resistance. The 2006 protests across Los Angeles and San Diego, California, numbered over 40,000 participants across several days and were larger than past historic student protests, including the campaign against California proposition 187, which sought to limit undocumented people's ability to access public education or health care in 1994, and the 1968 Los Angeles' "blowouts" carried out by Chicano and Chicana activists to oppose racism and inferior school conditions.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the 2006 events have received little academic recognition or study which allows for the opportunity to test current social movement theory that posits the need for political opportunity and connections to resources (financial and organizational) in order to mobilize a movement. Whether current theory is able to explain the student-led movement of 2006 remains unclear, therefore, I seek to employ race-centered theories to properly contextualize and understand the movement.

As Latino youth activists organized walkouts, protest, and/or classroom

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<sup>5</sup> Cho, Cynthia H. and Anna Gorman. 2006. "Massive Student Walkout Spreads Across Southland." *Los Angeles Times*. March 28, 2006.

discussions, they were participating in public manifestations within the socio-political context of anti-immigrant sentiment and racism. Moreover, these actions largely took place within school environments. As arenas of contention, schools contexts were both supportive and unsupportive. Furthermore, the impacts and significance of the socio-political context and arenas of contentions (e.g. schools), remains under-theorized and understood in periods of social contention. This means that centering the experiences and voices of youth of color, specifically, the activists who participated and/or organized actions and events are critical to more fully understand the 2006 movement.

I argue that the highly political and contentious racial climate of the 2006 student-led social movement presents a unique and potentially an important case to explore, challenge, and refine theories of the significance of race and racism in the United States and their impact on social movements. More specifically, I will examine and contextualize the emergence of Latino youth resistance within the larger context of U.S. racial politics in the period of proposed “comprehensive immigration reform” in 2006 and center the experiences of these young activists through their voice.

### **Theoretical framework**

I recognize minority led movements as strikes against the hierarchies that serve to protect and advance the interest of the current racial system, by oppressing people of color (Feagin 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2001; Velez 2008). In applying the extended case method, this study uses reflexive approaches to move between the “micro” and the “macro” to better understand the current context to larger structures and histories by building onto pre-existing theory (Burawoy et al. 1991; Burawoy 2009)). I engage

systemic racism theory in order to account for the historical and contemporary racial hierarchy of the United States, as well as the experiences in the realms of politics, economics, and education for people of color. I merge systemic racism theory and critical race theory (CRT) with social movement theory particularly *political process theory* and its concept of *political opportunity* and *threat* in the analysis of this study. By merging these theories, I intend to deepen our understanding of minority-youth-led social movement activism because these intersections of theory bring to bear new perspectives and questions.

Past episodes of social movement activism, such as the 1960s-1970s Chicano Movement have been heavily researched (Muñoz 1989; Gutiérrez 1998; and Montejano 2010). However, my review of the literature indicates that there is an absence in contemporary youth-led social movement scholarship, especially one dealing with youth of color. Few researchers have critically examined the children of the sleeping giant, namely, Latino youth activists, and how they understand their social movement, as well as challenged dominant racial narratives in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The 2006 episode of Latino youth activism can provide insight into studying social movements led by people of color. However, such an endeavor requires an expansion of theories that centralizes race and racism in combination with social movement theories. I intend to build onto existing theory, in order to expand our ability to explain the events of 2006. By

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<sup>6</sup> Political scientists coined the term in reference to the belief that Latino participation was lower than whites in electoral politics coined the term “sleeping giant”; furthermore, it also sheds lights on potential impact and demographic size of the group (Jackson 2011; Pantoja et al. 2001).

reworking existing concepts and utilizing qualitative methodologies, I intend to center the experiences and knowledge of the youth of color who participated in the anti-H.R. 4437 events. The *extended case* method allows for this particular case study to be analyzed between both the macro structural forces that shaped the events and the individual (micro) experiences of Latino youth, as phenomena not explained by current social movement theory. The extended case method can potentially allow for the strengthening of social movement theory through the use of race-centered theory. Again, my theoretical and empirical goals are not to refute relevant literature, rather I aim to build onto existing literature.

### **Contextualizing political struggle**

The development and creation of our current society must be recognized as the product of the racialized histories and the experiences of people of color. Elite white males continue to hold the majority of wealth and political power. This is especially evident in the racialized and nativist underpinnings' of immigration law, as Feagin asserts, "[systemic racism] at the macro-level, large scale institutions- with their white controlled normative structures- routinely perpetuate racial subordination and inequalities" (2010:12). The unequal and alienating relationships between the powerful ruling whites and people of color produces and continues to reproduce inequality based on maintaining the position of whites via organizational, institutional, and ideological structures (Feagin 2010).

For example, in the case of the Mexican origin population, the seminal work by Chicano scholar Albert Camarillo (1979), highlights the incorporation of the Mexican

population as deeply tied to their economic and political subordination to whites, in particular the development of the American capitalist system in Southern California. In addition to the economic restructuring, both legal and political power struggles created contentious relations with whites. Mexicans, both native born and immigrant, were subjugated to the bottom of political and economic structures. As Camarillo (1979) asserts, “without political, judicial, or law enforcement representatives, the Chicano people were defenseless against Anglo racism” (p.76). Camarillo’s research clearly and persuasively articulates the historical position of Mexican people in the United States. Specifically, he describes Southern California as being fundamentally shaped and reshaped by a legacy of conquest and resistance on political, economic, and racial fronts. Similarly, preeminent race scholars Cobas, Duany, and Feagin (2009), assert that “race” remains a powerful social construct in U.S. society and that Latinos have been racialized by the dominant white society and subjected to racist denigration regarding Latino physical and cultural characteristics. Cobas et al. (2009) assert that the racial framing of Latinos is centuries old and positions Latino inferiority on biological and cultural basis, therefore legitimizing policies aimed to deal with the “Mexican problem” (i.e. *Operation Wetback*, Proposition 187).

The proposed immigration legislation of H.R. 4437 served as another example of the political marginalization of Mexican people, as it sought to criminalize undocumented people as felons as well as others who provided assistance or resources to undocumented people (including family members). Lawmakers in the House of Representatives passed H.R. 4437 on December 15, 2005 with a 239 to 182 vote and



helped move the bill onto the senate floor. In doing so, politicians were continuing the historical legacy of categorizing and alienating the Mexican/ Latino population, as it racialized the Latino community as a perpetual foreigners and a danger to white America. Such social constructions and racialized framing of Latinos as criminals or foreigners, further perpetuates the racialization of the population.

In studying the experiences of Latino youth and their organized resistance to the racialized policies (i.e. H.R. 4437), I critically engage what race and racism means for social movements organized and led by youth of color within the racial hierarchy of the United States. I do so by contextualizing the historical and contemporary racial subordination of youth of color and their communities. Through the theoretical lens of critical race theory and systemic racism theory, I view legislative agendas such as H.R. 4437 as encompassing the goals and ideology of white supremacy. *Racialized politics* are central to understanding the political agenda of H.R. 4437. Therefore, social movements by people of color, and in this study case, by youth of color, are understood as resistance against the dominant racial order and dominant narratives.

Constituting 14.5 percent of the U.S. population as of 2005, Latinos are projected to account for 25 percent of the U.S. population in 2030 (Rodriguez 2008). Given the growing presence of Latinos in the United States, there is a growing area of interest in their social activism and their ability to impact policy and social change (in addition to electoral politics). As Feagin (2010) asserts, "life under a system of racism involves an ongoing struggle between racially defined human communities- one seeking to preserve its unjustly derived status and privileges and the other seeking to resist or overthrow its

continuing oppression" (p.13). In this study, I use Gamson and Meyer's (1996) definition of a social movement— "[c]ollective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities"— to define the resistance mounted by Latino students and youth across the United States in 2006. During this time, Latino youth actively challenged legislation regarding immigration reform, particularly House of Representatives' (H.R.) Bill 4437.<sup>7</sup>

### **Systemic racism and racial framing of Latinos**

Systemic racism theory recognizes the history and experiences of racialized groups as being foundationally impacted by exploitation and oppression, where whites have controlled and set the agendas and terms for all political, economic, and social relationships between marginalized groups and elite whites in power (Feagin 2006). Systemic racism organizes U.S. society, its organizations, and institutions. Systemic racism is interdependent, including social networks that are routinely imbedded in racial oppression (Feagin 2006, p.16). According to Feagin (2006), this system was organized by white Americans, predating the incorporation of Mexican people via the U.S.-Mexico war of 1848, and Latinos' largely remain in a racially subordinate position.

Latino's "place" in the U.S.' racial hierarchy is below that of whites, subsequently, they are seen as political and cultural outsiders when pressing for their

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<sup>7</sup> House of Representatives Bill 4437 "The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act" (H.R. 4437), passed on December 15, 2005 with a 239 to 182 vote. The bill sought to increase militarization of the border, expand e-verification of social security numbers, and change "Illegal presence" from a civil offense into a aggregated felony (Fetzer 2006).

own political demands (Feagin. 2006, p.290). White Americans' dominant position often places their political and economic interests in opposition and in contrast to the interest of Americans of color, as a result of seeking to maintain the status quo (Feagin 2000, 2010; Bonilla-Silva 1997). Thus racialized groups are inherently in a marginalized position in institutional, economic, and political resources when compared to the white majority. Furthermore, whites' economic and political dominance stems from systemic racism's micro and macro level reproduction. These inequalities in power and ability to assert power are clearly seen in social movements by people of color.

### **Racial framing of people of color**

The dominant racial framing of Black Americans and other Americans of color continues to perpetuate the emotion-laden attitudes, stereotypes, racial images, and narratives which seek to justify their inferior position (Feagin 2009). In two separate studies, researchers found both news and popular media to be largely responsible for the development and dissemination of an anti-Latino sentiment and nativism, because of its powerful ability to frame discourse and use of racialized imagery (Santa Ana, 2002 & Chavez, 2008). For example, although immigrant populations come from all over the globe and from different economic statuses (e.g. immigrant workers in high-tech industry, the medical field, manufacturing, garment industry, and agricultural sectors), the discourse on immigration, specifically “illegal” immigration largely focuses on Mexicans and to a smaller degree on other Latin American nationalities (Santa Ana 2002; Chavez 2008).). In his study, Chavez (2008) argues that the discourse and framing of Mexican immigrants utilizes and perpetuates their status as foreigners and a Latino

threat to “America.” Put differently, Latinos are cast as an immigrant group, a threat, and therefore non-American. Furthermore, little distinction is noted by the dominant white society between foreign born and U.S. born Latino populations- each is racialized and deemed threatening by the dominant society's "fears and misconceptions" regarding immigration (Chavez and Provine 2009).

This was also seen during the 2006 movement led by Latino youth, as they were routinely characterized as foreign born, invading armies, “out of control,” and perhaps most importantly, un-informed of the political policies and unworthy of being taken serious.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, the historical racial framing of Latinos has implications for minority-led resistance movements due in part to the racial structures in U.S. society. As Feagin (2010) critically notes, “racist attitudes tend to distort the target groups origins, physical appearance, values, and culture” (p. 98). This means that racial marginalization such as the criminalization of legal statuses, biologically based arguments, or debates on the cultural worthiness are based on racist attitudes. As such, these attacks are part of an “everyday defense” by and for white power and privilege. Systemic racism theory recognizes these actions *by white-led institutions* as oppression against people of color.

According to Haney-Lopez, “[...] racial language draw[s] close attention to the effects of racial discrimination because such effects do more than delimit life chances, they also contribute to the persistence of racial ideas”(1998:115). Haney-Lopez’

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<sup>8</sup> Fisher, Kent, Emily Ramshaw, Katherine Leal Unmuth. 2006. “Student Protesters Invade City Hall: Hundreds Ordered Back to the Class as Patience Wears Thin”. The Dallas Morning News. March 29, 2006  
Bulkeley, Deborah. 2006. “Hundreds of Students Rally Despite Objections”. Desert Morning News (Salt Lake City). April 1, 2006

attention to the effects of race and its persistence will be important when looking at the stereotypes of Latino Youth via media representation, and how they perpetuate and socially construct youth. Take for example the published comment made by a leading official of the San Diego Unified School District in a major newspaper regarding the Latino youth activists: “[Superintendent] said most of the protesters were younger high school students and wondered whether they had the attention span and organizational skills to carry out sustained demonstrations.”<sup>9</sup> In this example, the superintendent’s comment demonstrates the racialized framing of Latino youth, as uneducated and biologically inferior. Furthermore, the superintendent brings into question the students’ age and cognitive ability (“attention span”) to discredit the students’ political activism.

Contrary to the comment made by the superintendent, the emerging research on the 2006 youth-led movement clearly proves that the participating students not only demonstrated the ability to make political claims, but also that their protests compared to larger manifestations organized by adults with affiliations to professional and grassroots organizations (Perez Huber 2010; Getrich 2008; and Vélez, Huber, Lopez, de la Luz, and. Solórzano 2008). For instance, the youth activists successfully staged events such as walkouts, rallies, protests, forums, classroom discussion, teach-ins and various other manifestations to express their disapproval of H.R. 4437 (Velez et al. 2008). Clearly, these actions reflect high levels of organizations skills, conscious civic engagement among the participating youth and their ability to challenge political climates and

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<sup>9</sup> Moran, Chris. 2006. “A protest unmatched in magnitude, civility; First walkouts transform into a variety of reactions”. *San Diego Union Tribune* April 1, 2006

policies.

Americans of color have historically been in a dialectical process of resistance to oppression by whites, from slave rebellions to youth of color organizing against police brutality or racialized immigration policies (Feagin 2006, 2010). As a response to oppression, Americans of color have developed counter-frames as mechanisms to struggle against the covert and overt racism in society. Systemic racism theory provides an avenue to understand the context and roots of political struggle between people of color and elite white actors, who remain firmly in control of all the major forms of power in the U.S. society. In combination with critical race theory and social movement theory, this study examines how race and racism impact social movements by Latino youth.

### **Latino youth and the racialization of activism**

According to Delgado Bernal (2002), critical race theory (CRT) reveals how supposedly race-neutral laws and policies perpetuate racial and/or ethnic and gender subordination (Delgado Bernal 2002). This claim was examined Ruben Garcia (1995), in his analysis of California's proposition 187 (1994), Garcia asserts that, "critical race theorists also aim to deconstruct the cornerstones of liberal jurisprudence, such as colorblindness and the rule of law, and show how they operate to disadvantage nonwhites and further solidify white supremacy" (p.132). Therefore, minority youth activism must be seen as civic engagement, which has the potential to challenge the legitimacy of the dominant racial order (Davenport et al. 2011; Sanchez 2002). Political support for more restrictive immigration legislation has historically come

overwhelmingly from whites, for reasons due to racial prejudice, protection of ‘white jobs, and nativism (Garcia 1995).

Racism and resistance are important to examine in order to understand the manner in which Latino youths’ interaction with authorities such as school officials and police impacted the emergence of their social movement and their recruitment, tactics, as well as their own understanding. Additionally, the relationship between political contexts and racism is central to political or social justice struggles, such as immigration law, where people of color are advancing political claims that are in opposition to white’s interest. Recent research on the policing of these social movements demonstrated that they are ‘over-policed’ (Davenport et al. 2011). Furthermore, the authors argue that one factor contributing to the ‘over-policing’ is that people of color are deem threatening to white power holders. Consequently, such racialization by white power holders increases the likelihood of the use of repression and suppression to minimize the movements’ impact (Davenport et al. 2011). In the case of the 2006 student protest, Latino youth took to the streets in opposition of H.R. 4437 and incidents of police intimidation and ‘over-policing’ were also reported, thus providing support for the argument that racialization, where people of color are deemed threatening is used as justification for greater police involvement. Davenport et al. (2011), represents a growing interest in studying the relationship between race and social movements. This present thesis also aims to expand the current literature and research by incorporating race centered and critical theories which seek to understand the foundational impacts of racism and its consequences in social movements.

Insights from critical race theory and its sub-field, Latino critical race theory, inform this study. I attempt to build on these two theories by merging them with social movement concepts. In recent critical analysis and studies of national newspapers and media, scholars found anti-Latino and anti-immigrant language, racialized framing, and “white-washing” images of the Latino population (Santa Ana 2002; Chavez 2008; Davila 2008). Such racialization was also noted by research on Latino youth during the period of the 2006 protests against H.R. 4437. For example, Velez et al. (2008), the authors assert that Latino youth were cast as perpetual foreigners during the period of heightened racist nativism. Furthermore, the study found that in their coverage of the protests, journalists tended to praise youth activists engaged in indirect forms activism (e.g. classroom discussions, school sanctioned teach-ins), while at the same time discredit direct forms of actions such as walkouts, protests, and other activities which disrupted school and/or power structures. Significant to the Velez et al. (2008) study was the application of Latino/a critical race theory, as it provided a lens from which to view race, racism, nativism and how Latinos are deemed to have less of a right to protest. Secondly, the study supports past claims that immigration law has been both indirectly and directly racialized and targeted at specific populations (Garcia 1995; Velez et al 2008).

Scholarship has documented a legacy of marginalization and racialization of Latinos and other youth of color in the U.S. school system (San Miguel and Valencia 1998; Kozol 2006). According to critical race theorists (CRT), the legacy of institutional racism continues in contemporary schooling. CRT recognizes that schools have the



ability to coexist as arenas of oppression and marginalization as well as emancipation and empowerment for students of color (Solórzano and Villalpando 1998; Velez et al. 2008). My study aims to examine whether significant levels of activism took place in 2006 within and outside of educational institutions. In other words, did schools become arenas of contention in which youth activism interacted with teachers, administrators, and other officials in efforts to make political claims?

CRT scholars recognize educational institutions as sites of both marginalization and empowerment. However, this dynamic is overwhelmingly in reference to educational experiences and outcomes (e.g. push-out rates, academic success, and navigating social and cultural expectations). In regards to social movement activism, such as youth organizing their peers and the impact of faculty's responses to student protests, the literature remains thin. Therefore, the experiences of Latino youth activists in their school are important sites for examination in order to contribute both empirically and theoretically to social movement and race scholarship.

Systemic racism theory and critical race theory provide a framework to understand the heighten period of anti-immigrant sentiment and the strategies developed by youth activists, including the development of a counter-frame which served to combat the dominant white racial framing of people of color. Both race-centered theories recognize the disproportionate power structures which cultural, political, and social battles take place in (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Velez et al. 2008; Feagin 2010). Including the oppressive relationships between elite white actors and Latino youth activists, where Latino youth represent marginalized youth fighting for their community. However, youth activist have

the power to resistance, the ability to combat the dominant discourse, and challenge structures in both large and small manners. One such form is the use of “counter-stories,” a perspective from marginalized or non-dominant groups serves a powerful tool in detailing Latino youth's experiences (Fernandez 2002). According to race scholars political claims made by marginalized groups (minorities) are challenges the status quo, including the United States’ racial hierarchy (Feagin 2010; Bonilla-Silva 2001). Counter stories represent one of the possible avenues of struggle.

A successful Latino student movement, especially one with a radical voice, would be a direct challenge to the state and susceptible to marginalization by authorities. In the case of the present study, high school students who challenged the dominant structures both within their schools and outside via social manifestations were theoretically, very likely to be the focus of authorities’ suppression. (i.e. arrest, citations, threats). My study aims to document the experiences of participants from the 2006 social movement in opposition to H.R. 4437. More specifically, I am examining how youth activists understood racism and race in their resistance and subsequent interventions by authorities (e.g. repression by educational and state institutions).

### **Understanding the social movement literature**

In historical models of social movements, the emergence of “collective behavior,” was often explained as a breakdown between the individual and the social structure. Classical models understood social movements to be caused by psychological distress that lead to collective behavior outside the "norm," such as engaging in social movements or deviant behavior (McAdam 1999:8). It is important to note that the

classical models fails to understand how socio-political dynamics and racial dynamics affect and shape emerging social movements. Differing from classical models, scholars of resource mobilization theory have tended to highlight the centrality of resources for social movements. Resource mobilization theory de-stresses political contexts and the social actors who carry out movements; furthermore, the theory highlights institutional resources as the key to success (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Jenkins 1983, McAdam 1999). Although the resource mobilization theory does a better job of explaining ability of social movements to engage institutional structures than the classical theory, it is narrow in its applicability for explaining minority youth social movements, given that youth movements lack the resources which resource mobilization theorists deem central. Furthermore, resource mobilization theory fails to account and recognize for the historical legacy of economic and political oppression against people of color.

Resource mobilization theorists argue for the need of institutional or elite's support of a social movement. In other words segments of elite groups provide important institutional resources (i.e. funding). As McAdam (1999) notes, the fact that insurgent groups can organize themselves even with limited resources for some limited period demonstrates the shortcomings of the resource mobilization model to explain these events. Clearly, the model is also unable to fully address the emergence of racial minority social movements who often lack funding resources. Additionally, resource mobilization theory fails to both properly situate the centrality of race in U.S. politics and conceptualize social movements led by people of color as challenging the status quo (Davenport et al. 2011; Bernstein 1997; Velez et al. 2008). These shortcomings render

resource mobilization as inadequate to explain cases such as higher levels of police repression against activists or why some movements are deemed more threatening to white power holders than others.

Systemic racism would understand these contradictions as directly linked to the racial ideological and power structures in the U.S., where people of color are racialized and marked as inferior, therefore, justifying police mistreatment. In the case of the 2006 youth-led movement, Latino youth were unable to access traditional political channels and their subsequent actions were seen as hostile by school officials, state authorities, and racialized by the media (Velez et al. 2008). Inherently as minors, the Latino youth activists in 2006 were unable to access traditional power channels (e.g. voting), and were generally vulnerable to school authorities and police officials. In order to examine the manner in which minority social movements interact with authority figures, the *voice* of Latino/a youth activists must be brought to light. For example, critical race theory's emphasis and use of "counter-stories." Methodologically, "counter-stories," serve to center the perspective and *voice* of marginalized and/or members of non-dominant groups, thus serving as a powerful conceptual tool for detailing the experiences of Latino youth activists and the existence of a counter-frame.

### **Political process model**

The political process model (PPM) stresses three factors in the emergence of an insurgency- *expanding political opportunities*, indigenous *organizational strength*, and *cognitive liberation* (McAdam 1999). *Expanding political opportunities*, are based on the position of aggrieved groups to the socio-political structure. This means that changes

or shifts in the groups' position (i.e. policy change) can create political openings, therefore, making social mobilization advantageous for asserting or achieving the groups' goals (McAdam 1999:40-43). *Indigenous organizational strength*, meaning the resources of the aggrieved population (i.e. minority group), such as leadership, organizational infrastructure, and communication network(s)- all key in mobilizing the target population. Lastly, *cognitive liberation*, represented by the consciousness of an insurgent, as McAdam argues, "[m]ediating between opportunities and action are people and the subjective meanings this attach to their situation recognizes (1999:48). As the PPM explains, the level of *Cognitive liberation*, is impacted by *expanding political opportunities*, and can serve to strengthen one's commitment (membership).

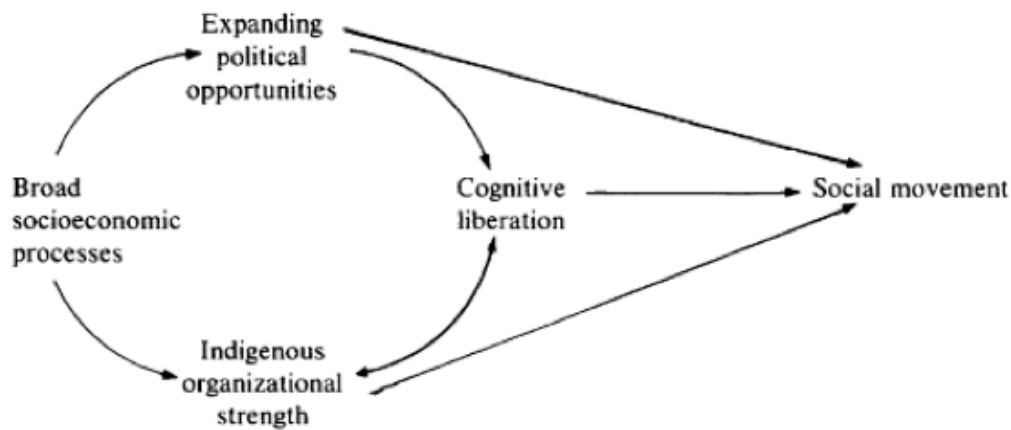


Figure 1. Diagram of the political process model (McAdam 1999:51).

As figure one (1) demonstrates, underlying the three central factors in the political process model are the broad socio-economic processes, as McAdam (1999)

writes: “[...] Social processes such as industrialization promote insurgency only indirectly through a restructuring of existing power relations (p .41). The PPM differs from earlier classical models, which posit a sudden or short-term disruption in social relations as a catalyst for social movements. However, the PPM recognizes this process to be cumulative and develop over long periods of time (McAdam 1999:41).

Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) employ a model of political opportunity in which “relevant aspects of opportunity are a function of the particular challengers and issues under concern”(p.1634). Political opportunities create incentives for aggrieved groups in position to engage in collective action (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; McAdam 1999). The political process model contends that a proposed law or new policy can create incentives for challengers to use their position in order to seek political change and when structural opportunities present the possibility of sustained insurgency. However, the model’s ability to explain the emergence of youth led activism fails to account for the status of “minors.”

The PPM also fails to explain distinctions in the level of organization needed to organize a social movement or how groups that have relatively little or no social movement experience (e.g. youth activists), can and will emerge. Therefore, the PPM is unable to fully explain the 2006 case in light of H.R. 4437 legislation and anti-immigrant sentiment. While a recent study on the 2006 anti-H.R. 4437 movement, documented the “unifying effect of anti-immigrant sentiment” on a population of mid-western participants (Benjamin-Alvarado, DeSipio, and Montoya 2009), the study was again focused on adults, not youth activists. Furthermore, Benjamin-Alvarado et al. (2009)

failed to properly contextualize the social movement within the foundationally racial history of the U.S. Therefore, this gap in the literature serves to highlight the need for an extension of theory.

Social movement theorist, Steingern (1995), defines resistance *repertoires* as having the ability to generate sustained and patterned dialogue between challengers and power-holders (p.56). In the case of the Black Power and Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s, each developed *repertoires* that expressed powerful critiques (counter-frame) of white oppression. The Black Power repertoire of the 60s and 70s were relatively successful in gaining widespread support among Blacks as well as mobilizing via organizations and events (Kim 2000). It is useful to recognize *repertoires* as tools developed over time that help shape and guide discourse rooted in historical struggle. I conceptualize the 2006 events as having organizational strengths tied to their particular school's *repertoire of resistance*, because youth often mobilized as schools rather than solidified organizations. *A repertoire of resistance*, in this case represents a school's access to prior experience, tools, and resources for developing the "insurgent consciousness" amongst the student activists.

Social movement scholars argue that insurgent consciousness is demonstrated by participants' "framing," evidenced by their understanding of social activism and civic engagement, as well as their understanding of H.R. 4437 and the legislation's implications for their community (Getrich 2008). Getrich (2008) interview sample includes second-generation youth participants of the 2006 social movement. The author argues that these students articulated an inclusive, and pro-immigrant stance.

Additionally, she found that participants were engaging in cultural citizenship, a concept that highlights the ways in which people claim space, rights, and creating social belonging (Getrich 2008). Other studies have also documented the significance of H.R. 4437 to the emergence of protest in 2006 due to the legislation's potential ability to expanded rather than lessen the power discrepancy between Latinos and legislators (Barreto et al. 2009; Getrich 2008; Velez et al. 2008). However, the PPM and other social movement approaches are not able to historically contextualize the ongoing marginalization of communities of color, nor the significance of race in organized resistance. Instead, these theories focus on social activism as a means for social change through institutional policy (McAdam 1999) or explain the occurrence of social protest as a means of social belonging (Getrich 2008).

Race centered theories such as systemic racism theory, differs from PPM and social movement theory, as they seek to deepen our understanding of the relationship between race, oppression, and power by recognizing the historical development and trajectory of resistance by people of color to oppression. Furthermore, systemic racism theory highlights the existence and development of counter-frames (Feagin 2010). In the case of the 2006 social movement, it was not a stand-alone event, as it is very much connected to the racial oppression of people of color and its legacy.

At the same time, it is important to note that marginalized communities have historically responded when underlying conditions required action (Feagin and Hahn 1973). While, the PPM can provided insight on how resources impact a movement's development and how state repression may unfold, there remains a need for theories



whose explanatory power can help shed light on the 2006 youth-led movement. More specifically, there is a need for an extension of theories that can help explain how race and racism are understood by youth activists of color and how race and/or racism impacts movements led by youth of color, such as their interactions with authorities and repression.

### **Critique of political opportunity, a case for political threat**

Almeida (2003) is critical of the PPM for failing to fully delineate between *opportunities* and *threats*. Additionally, the PPM fails to explain distinctions in the levels of organization needed and how groups with relatively little or no social movement experience (youth activists) can and will emerge. Due to these shortcomings, PPM is unable to fully explain the phenomenon of the 2006 youth-led social movement. Almeida recognizes and addresses this gap with his concept, *political threat*. Almeida (2003) asserts that *political threat* can serve as a catalyst to social mobilization and is demonstrated when policy places a population's rights' and or benefits at risk unless collective action is mobilized by challenger group(s) (Almeida 2003). Salient characteristics of threatening political environments and opportunities include erosion of rights and state repression, therefore, increasing the cost of action, as well as inaction (Tarrow 2011; Almeida 2003).

However, according to Almeida (2003), such contexts can be overcome by "elaborate organizational infrastructure" with well-organized and resourceful groups (p.351). Thus, *political threat* would serve to explain the emergence of activism by Latino youth in response to the threat of criminalization via the H.R. 4437 bill. I propose

to apply and extend Almeida's *political threat* concept in this study by including a racial component that recognizes the historical and current socio-political context of the United States. While Almeida's study took place in an authoritarian settings in Central America, where power relations between rulers and ruled were largely disproportionate, this study examines a social movement within a historically racialized environment that is deeply rooted in alienating relationships between the dominant society and marginalized communities (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2010).

### **Racialized political threat defined**

Systemic racism theory recognizes that actors, overwhelmingly elite white males, maintain and control the majority of power at the highest levels of society, such as political institutions (Feagin 2006). In the 2006 events, the powerful actors included congressman Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI), as the main sponsor of H.R. 4437, as well as congressmen Duncan Hunter (R-CA) and Thomas Tancredo (R-CO), who were major supporters of H.R. 4437 and authored amendments to the bill seeking to strengthen the criminalization of undocumented people and the militarization of the U.S. and Mexico border.

This thesis argues that political threats are in fact *racialized threats*, as the objective of such policies seek to further protect white privileges and status and within that process deepen the marginalized of Latinos, both documented and undocumented. *Racialized political threat(s)*, are policies aimed to preclude rights and benefits from a targeted population and serve to further buttress the dominant racial position of whites. For example, H.R. 4437 proposed to further criminalized undocumented immigrant and

people who “serve” them, by perpetuating their historical marginalization and dehumanization, thus putting those populations furthest from undocumented people at a greater economic, political and social advantage. This demonstrates that cases of anti-immigrant policy must be understood as *racialized political threats*, which seek and have the potential to limit the rights and/or benefits of a population regardless of “status,” unless collective resistance is mobilized (i.e. H.R. 4437, SB 1070).

### **Chapter I summary**

Past studies by white social movement theorists (McAdam 1999; Tarrow 2011), have often been concerned with successes/failures or how demands became institutionalized, both important and meaningful impacts of political mobilization. However, implicitly missing in their analysis is the recognition of the foundationally systemic racist underpinnings and interest of U.S. institutions and politics. Such an approach misses the larger racial context, racial ideologies, and structures impacting movements led by people of color.

Systemic racism theory, therefore, is fundamental for understanding the salience of race and racism in the 2006 youth-led movement and for making the claim that H.R. 4437 was indeed a *racialized political threat*, veiled through language and rhetoric, but nonetheless seeking to solidify the inferior position of undocumented people and documented. Based on the literature in systemic racism theory, critical race theory, and political process theory, I anticipate the following:

- A) Racialized political threats serve as catalyst for periods of activism among Latino youth.

- B) School sites in the period of study were contentious spaces where Latino youth had to confront and challenge peers, teachers, and officials.
- C) Supportive spaces in the school were important for the development of “insurgent consciousness.”
- D) Counter-frames of resistances emerged as mechanisms to understand their (students’) actions and challenges.
- E) School’s organizational strengths or lack of impacted the level and actions taken by students.
- F) Repression by authorities (police and school officials) against Latino youth activism aimed to limit and/or end their organizing.

My task is to see if these anticipations are supported in my research data. In the next chapter, I will go into detail the study’s research design and methods, including a discussion of the extended case and qualitative methodologies as a means to understand the particular processes at play in social movements led by people of color.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS**

This study employed qualitative methods. In-depth interviews with Latina and Latino young adults who were high school students in 2006 and participated in the youth-led actions. Their experiences are the principal method for understanding the role of race and racism in their social movement. Past researchers have argued for the critical importance of recognizing youth of color as holders and creators of knowledge, whose experiences are fertile ground for theoretical and empirical examination (Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Villenas and Deyhle 1999; Delgado Bernal 2002; Velez et al. 2008). In Ginwright (2007), the researcher interviews and conducts participant observations of fifteen black youth activists, the study's findings suggest that minority youth partake in activism outside of traditional channels in response to school and community needs. Arguably most important in the Ginwright study is the centering of the experiences of youth of color. Similarly, I have conducted twenty-four in-depth and semi-structured interviews with Latina and Latino youth participants of the 2006 student social movement. All participants have been given pseudonyms for purposes of confidentiality.

#### **Participant demographics**

Of the twenty-four participants, thirteen participants were from Los Angeles, California, with five being female and eight male. Eleven participants were from San Diego, California, with six being female and five males. All participants self-identified as Latina/o, Chicano, Mexican, or Mexican-American and were in high school in

2006 (grades 9-12). Additionally, all participated and/or organized in either indirect or direct forms of social activism during the period of study. Furthermore, four interviewees identified as first-generation, meaning they were born outside the United States and immigrated during their childhood. Nineteen interviewees were identified as second-generation, meaning they were born in the United States and have at least one parent who was born outside the United States. The study's sole fourth-generation participant, identified as Chicana, with both her parents being born in the United States and all 3 of 4 grandparents being born in the greater Los Angeles area.

### **Centering the voice of participants in race scholarship**

Race scholars Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008), argue that race is socially constructed with contextual meanings where, "... structures, ideologies, and attitudes [are] historically instilled with "racial meaning" and [are] contingent and contested" (p.59). In this study, I center the voices of youth of color through qualitative methodologies and reflexive analysis. Qualitative methods have been selected due to their ability to critically examine the role of race and racism in youth's experiences, in addition to recognizing people of color as holders and creators of knowledge (Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Delgado Bernal 2002; Ginwright 2007; Velez et al. 2008). Epistemologically, the *voices* of Latino/a youth represent marginalized experiences and knowledge, largely excluded from the academy and dismissed in the cannon of sociology (Lander 1973; Harding 1993; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). The strength in such methodologies, rest in their ability to centralize the historically marginalized *voices*

of communities of color and allow them to speak for themselves as well as challenge the dominant frame.

### **Extended case method**

I engage the extended case method by applying Feagin's (2006) *systemic racism theory* in order to contextualize racial resistance in the form of the Latino student-led social movement. Additionally, I seek to build upon McAdam's (1999) *political process theory*, specifically, *political threat* as extended and refined by Almeida (2003). From the findings I refine concepts and develop *racial political threat*, as a means to explain the emergence and conditions leading towards social movement activism by Latino students. The use of "counter-stories," serve represent the perspective of marginalized or non-dominant groups and are powerful tools in detailing Latino youth's experiences. According to race scholars, political claims made by marginalized groups (minorities) are challenges to the status quo, including the United States' racial hierarchy (Feagin 2010; Bonilla-Silva 2001). This means that a successful Latino youth movement, especially one with a radical voice would be a direct challenge to the state.

### **Data collection**

Interviews were collected with participants from the Spring 2006 social movement in Southern California (Los Angeles county and San Diego county), due to the regions' documented vibrancy in activism (Brodkin 2007). The spring of 2006 was a period of extraordinary political activism by Latinos as activists organized against the propose immigration policy deemed oppressive, H.R. 4437. Such levels of Latino

activism had not been seen since the 1990s and more broadly the Chicano movement (1960s-1970s). The difficulty in accessing participants from this period of social activism was overcome via, *Chain Referrals* (snowball sampling), due to the method's practical advantages in gaining access to "hidden" target populations (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Browne 2005). The snowball sampling assisted in locating participants through social networks. In order to broaden the scope of experiences documented and examined, I made "entry" by contacting various community organizations and teachers in the Southern California area to help locate interviewees.

Having a variety of entry points helped cast a larger "net" in recruiting participants and avoids having over-representation of similar networks. Interviews can provide rich and powerful data from the perspective of the participants and recruited participants will provide further access to other participants.

Interviews were conducted with each participant and audio recorded to ensure transcription accuracy. Questions covered factors leading to activism, racial/ethnic background, and experiences with authorities during the movement. For example, "How did school authorities or police officials react/address student activism and how did you and/or other activist respond?"

## **Procedures**

The in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in either private spaces such as someone's home, semi-public spaces such as a library study room, or a café table. Following Institutional Review Board policies, each participant signed a consent form to be interviewed, as well as gave permission for audio recording. Audio recording



was used to capture the data, along with field notes and both were used to aid in the accurate transcription of each participant's interview. I began each interview informing the participant of confidentiality and then moved into the semi-structure interview questions. Additional probing questions such as "can you explain further or can you provide an example?" followed questions that needed elaboration or detail. In regards to language, interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, and combinations such as "Spanglish" (phrases spoken with both English and Spanish). Allowing for the use of these languages in the research captures the participant's knowledge and experiences in their own words (Denzin and Lincoln 2008), unique meanings are important and therefore significant in the formation of indigenous categories. As a researcher I found giving participants the choice of interviewing in their chosen language (Spanish, English, or a mixture) allowed them to fully express their experiences as well as assisted in building rapport.

### **Data analysis**

Once data was collected, I transcribed and prepared the interview data for coding. Creswell (2003) highlights the importance of reading through the data to "obtain a general sense" and making researcher notes (p.191.) The coding process aims to serve as a means to systematically examine the research questions. Line by line coding will ensure the data collected is rich and allows the data to illuminate and provide insight to the experiences of Latino youth activists. Also line by line coding will allow me to distance myself from assumptions (Emerson 2005). Next, I will moved into an analysis of the coding by moving data it into "chunks," based on the participants interviews and

in communication with research question (Rossman and Rallis 1998:171). Through out the examination and interpretation of the data, I was in dialogue with the theories I aim to apply- how they provided insight and where theory needed to be extended to answer the interest of the study and next steps for further areas for inquiry.

## **Limitations**

In the case of this study, the series of events labeled a social movement occurred approximately seven years ago. Therefore, respondents were sometimes difficult to locate, thus limiting the “pool” of possible respondents. Additionally, due to the study’s proposed *chain referrals* (snowball sampling), “verifying the eligibility of potential respondents” will need to be addressed (Bernacki and Waldorf 1981:144), I utilized screening questions meant to qualify eligible participants; specifically, whether they were involved in the movement or not. Further method assumptions in *chain referrals*, claim “self-containment” due to the reliance on referrals. I overcome such limitations by casting a “wide net” and pooling from various sources, in my case recruiting from various locations (Los Angeles and San Diego, CA and different organizations for initial respondents). Furthermore, qualitative research requires the researcher to become well aware of his data, via interviews, observations, and various other techniques meaning that the validation of data and findings are important to address (please see “data analysis”).

## Chapter II summary and significance

This thesis research utilized the extended case method in studying the 2006 Latino/a youth social movement, giving the researcher the ability to “link between the micro and the macro” and examines the forces shaping the social phenomena (Burawoy et al. 1991:274). Structural forces such as systemic racism and subsequent historical barriers to opportunities and resources are lacking from much of the social movement theory. Therefore, there is a need to examine the mobilization of marginalized groups and specifically those organized by minority youth during periods of political activism. Both systemic racism theory and critical race theory centralize oppression, racialization, and recognizes the impacts of these social forces on people of color lives and experiences.

As I have shown, when studying social movements led by people of color, specifically, Latino youth and their experiences as activists against *racialized political threats*, it is critical to understand how race and racism impact the ability of minority groups to take political action outside of the traditional channels. Therefore, conducting in-depth interviews with participants provides the greatest insight into specific issues of youth experiences and interactions with authorities. Meaning that participant’ experiences and knowledge is central for epistemological purposes. Care was taken to collect a range of participants from south California and reflexive methodology allows for a discussion between theoretical claims and empirical realities.

The broader goal of this research is to shed light on the impact of social structures and political factors that may lead to activism amongst Latino youth in the

United States. Moreover, how participants deal with school and political environments both contentious and supportive. In chapter three, I begin by discussing findings from the study and as well as test theoretical debates in order to build upon them, as described in the extended case method. Due to the case study nature of the research, generalizing findings may be shortsighted and requires a larger examination and sample.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **FROM NATIONAL TO LOCAL ISSUES AND THE UNDERLYING CONDITIONS OF THE STUDENT ACTIVISM**

Recent studies have examined Latino political participation, both conventional and unconventional (protest). However, the findings of these studies are inclusive for explaining how students understand race and racism in their organized resistance (Getrich 2008; Velez et al. 2008; and Barreto et el. 2009). The majority of existent literature on social movements and political engagement by the Latino population remains focused on adults. For example, Valdez' (2012), study of electoral participation indicated that adult Latinos were driven to vote by ethnic-solidarity, meaning that they went to the polls when issues pertained to the group. In regards to participation in unconventional politics such as protest, again with adults, research by Martinez (2005) indicated that Latinos were less likely to engage in protest than their non-white counterparts, but the likelihood of Latino participation increased with age, education, and income. However, neither of these studies included the high school age populations, nor did the researchers critically dealt with the social contexts and historical legacies of oppression and resistance in communities of color. Nonetheless, Valdez (2012) and Martinez' (2005) work indicates that adults Latinos understand the importance of politics and the need for more research focused on the young Latino population with a focus on political engagement in both conventional and non-conventional ways.

In this chapter I will examine the underlying conditions (e.g. anti-immigrant sentiment) from which the 2006 Latino youth-led social movement emerged as evidence

in the racialized political discourse and the school context. Sites of education are important in this case study due to their history of being at the center of legal, political, and social struggles for equity and justice. Secondly, due to the amount of organizing and actions by student activists within their school settings, it is important to theoretically examine the school at the institution level, best represented by administration and school policies and the classroom, best represented by teachers and classroom practices.

I will situate the 2006 social movement by tracing the historical and contemporary social, economic, and political relationship between the Mexican-American/ Chicano/a community and the dominant white power and racial structure in the United States. Lastly, I aim to apply the political process model in order to understand the extent of organizational levels existing within the high school campuses prior to the social movement and also examine how the school context (i.e. supportive and/or unsupportive to Latino youth activists) may have shaped the movement. For example, examine how the presence or absence of school organizations impacted the experiences of youth activists.

Although this study is primarily concerned with the episode of the 2006 student social movement, it is important to recognize and tie the underlying conditions of anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment to the historical racial subordination by white agents against people of color. Additionally, it is important to highlight the historical and contemporary legitimizing forces and arguments used to carry out such actions by the United States government and agencies against the “Mexican problem.” For example,

the national discourse of scapegoating the Mexican community, as criminal and as an economic and cultural threat demonstrates the disproportionate power and racialization of non-white populations by power holders. Systemic racism theory would argue that racism is structurally oriented and carried forth to buttress the racial hierarchy. This would include the powerful media due to its ability to frame the national discourse. For example, this includes labeling people of Mexican origin as “foreigners” or criminally inclined. As previous research has documented and argued, such discourse perpetuates racially laden stereotypes and aims to justify the actions of authorities as “corrective measures” or interventions, such as deportation based on racial profiling (Chavez 2008; Cobas et al. 2009).

Critical race theory would highlight the reification of legal categories in the process to racialize the Mexican and Latino population as “illegal aliens.” Such reification links Latino communities as “outsiders” within the U.S. society and justifies sanctioning state-sponsored repression. In applying both theories to examine Latino youth-led activism, it allows us to see the context in which racially based policies are carried out by state actors and how it serves the interest of white supremacy. For example, police repression against Latino youth activists in 2006 would be understood as state sanction repression against a group who is unable to legally (i.e. vote) make political claims and or take action in the debate surrounding H.R. 4437. Therefore, police repression that limits the *voice* and participation of Latino youth serves the interest of white America by categorizing them as illegitimate or un-American.

In the eyes of conventional social movement theorists concerned with state structures, political contexts, and political “opportunities,” the debate surrounding immigration legislation would offer a political space for organizations and activists to launch claims. The political process model would also assert the critical role of organization and insurgent consciousness amongst activists for the emergence of a movement. However, as detailed in chapter one, while the political process model seeks to highlight resources, insurgent consciousness, and the context of the arenas of contention, the model lacks an understanding of the foundational impact of race and racism. While this study is primarily concerned with the national context of anti-immigrant sentiment and the racialized nature of the *political threat* that the H.R. 4437 presented, the localized interaction between student activists and school officials (i.e. teachers and administration) are central to explaining the diversity of youth activist’s experiences. For example, Adela, a second-generation, self-identified Chicana, from San Diego made a clear link between her local context and the national political discourse.

Well over here, people, students were really upset with the law [H.R. 4437], the nation that was trying to pass against undocumented people, *pero* (but), here in Escondido they had the renting ordinance ban, where they wouldn’t be able to rent to undocumented people. I think it was all that, students were mad at both, at all that. We [students] all know someone who was going to be affected by it (Adela, San Diego).

Adela’s connection between the local and national political context and her view of injustice facing her community served as important reasons for her decision to become involved. Similarly, Joaquin, a second-generation, self-identified Mexican from Los Angeles, went further in recognizing the racial nature of the anti-immigrant sentiment coming from the political context. He said:



Oh yeah, absolutely, if you look at the part of the bill that went into protecting the US/Mexico border and not the US-Canadian border, they want to militarize *con todo* (with everything), weapons wire, more agents. You start to get that sense; yeah they're talking about you. No one else, when they talk about immigration or have news reports, they show us. Not others or even others who over stay their visas or are white. It was for us straight up (Joaquin, South Central Los Angeles).

Although Joaquin is U.S. born, he brings into question the status of his personal well-being, with the passage of H.R. 4437. Furthermore, he speaks to the link between the racial marginalization of non-white immigrants, “they show us [Latinos],” when speaking of Latino immigrants who are framed as non-authorized and racialized as a threat. Joaquin also emphasizes the desire of legislators to use greater technology and border patrol agents in their quest to defend the U.S./Mexico border. As evidenced in prior episodes of immigration legislation, the focus remains quelling the on-coming “hoards.” Again, an example of discourse creating an image that links foreignness and threat to Latino immigrants, a phenomena which Otto Santa Ana (2002) highlights in *Brown Tide Rising*. Implicit, in both Adela and Joaquin’s statements was a recognition of the national and local political contexts on their personal experiences. It is important to mention that each participant recognized the primary target of H.R. 4437, the Latino community. An issue that I will address further in chapter four, by examining how student activists understood race and racism in relation to H.R. 4437.

### **Legacies of racial subordination and the Chicano/a struggle for educational equity**

The 2006 student-led social movement was not the first time Chicana/o and Latina/o or students of color had engaged in social justice. During the great depression when the United States entered into economic turmoil, white Americans sought answers

and actions to address the lack of jobs and economic despair. In turn, politicians publically scapegoated the Mexican population and claimed Mexicans were partly responsible for the lack of jobs and introduced policies aimed to “publically rectify” the issue. This included discriminatory policies against U.S. born and foreign-born Mexicans in job hiring and calls for repatriation by the dominant group (Balderrama and Rodriguez 2006). Following the Great Depression and World War II, the racial status and economic position of Mexican/Mexican Americans remained subordinate to white Americans. As critical race scholar, Ruben Garcia (1995) states.

By 1946, it became impossible to separate Mexican Americans from deportable Mexicans. Thus, in 1954, over one million people were deported under "Operation Wetback." [...] The program included a relentless media campaign to characterize the Operation as a national security necessity, and a tightening of the border to deter undocumented immigration (p.127).

The justification for repression against the Latino community rested on their framing as a danger to white American society, as evidenced by the calls for tightening the border. Such political claims continued into the 1990s and early 2000s by legislators and anti-immigrant groups and were given heavy media attention, such as the *Save Our State* organization in California in support of Proposition 187 (1994) and the *Minutemen* project in support of H.R. 4437 (2006).<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Proposition 187 (1994), the state of California sought to

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<sup>10</sup> The Minutemen Project was found by Jim Gilchrist, in October 2004 and mobilized its anti-immigrant camps in 2005, claiming to be doing the job that the federal government had failed to do, protect the border. The Minutemen organization called for increase militarization of the border and increased deportation and criminalization of undocumented immigrants (Walsh, 2008).

criminalize the undocumented population and withdraw resources from their children (e.g. schooling and healthcare). The passage of proposition 187 received little support from the Latino electorate. Garcia (1995) argues that the campaign that emerged by Latinos against proposition 187 demonstrated the group's understanding that "... discrimination against undocumented immigrants harms the entire community" and opened the door to racially-based discrimination against all, including U.S. born citizens and "documented" residents (p.147-148). Similarly to Proposition 187, on a national level in 2006, H.R. 4437 sought to criminalize the undocumented community and also U.S. citizens and residents who provided social services and resources to an undocumented person. Both of the periods surrounding Proposition 187 and H.R. 4437 must be understood as times of heightened anti-immigrant sentiment at national and local levels.

### **The school context and organization**

Angela Valenzuela's (1999) study examines the school context and experiences of immigrant and U.S. born Mexican youth, in which she asserts that schools engage in a system of *subtractive schooling*. These institutional practices amount to subtractive assimilation, where the U.S. schooling does not incorporate or value the cultural capital, history, or experiences of "Mexican-American, Chicano/as, and cholo" students. The marginalization of non-white culture(s) and their active exclusion via omission, 'white-washing', or policy, for example, Tucson, Arizona with House Bill 2281 in 2012 legally banning "ethnic studies." Gillborn (2005) argues that these actions demonstrate the role of education policy as an act of white supremacy, as it supports racist ideology and

oppression (p.20). This means that racism manifest itself in a variety of forms within a school context including policy, curriculum, over-policing, and the tracking of students of color into an inferior education. These practices serve to buttress and reproduce white supremacy (Parker, Deyhle, and Villenas 1999) and have a historical legacy of such (see San Miguel and Valencia 1998).

In the midst of the political climates surrounding state-sanctioned deportations in the 1930s and 1950s, the education of Mexican youth was sub-standard to say the least. During these time periods activist organizations launched some of the first campaigns by people of color for educational equality. For example, historian and prominent Chicana Scholar, Vicki Ruiz (2001), documented the resistance to oppression by the Mexican and Mexican American community in their fight for educational equality. In her work, she documented legal cases and predecessors to the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District* (1931) and *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947). The results of these major cases, at least hypothetically, led to better education. Unfortunately, the current conditions of schools with predominantly Mexican origin populations such as those in East Los Angeles remained inferior to the educational facilities and resources of white students (Rosen 1974).

The sub-standard conditions of the Chicana/o schools in East Los Angeles extended beyond dilapidated facilities. According to Rosen's (1974) study, Chicana/o students receive an inferior education and have limited educational opportunities. One example is the lack of support to access higher education, as evidence by the large

dropout rates. Current education statistics support the continuing existence of this disparity; Latino students have the highest dropout rates (NCES, 2010).

Almost 40 years later, in 2006, the conditions and experiences of Chicana/o, Latino, and Mexican students in predominantly “minority” areas such as South L.A., East Los Angeles, and parts of San Diego, California have largely remained inferior to their white counterparts. The marginalization of youth based on race, gender, or class have been thoroughly documented by education scholars and historians (San Miguel 1987; Fernandez 2002). The experiences of youth of color in educational institutions can range from being sites of oppression to sites of resistance, empowerment, and transformation (Solórzano and Villalpando 1998). Similarly, the racial and economic marginalization of the Latino community continues, as evidence by their lower levels of wealth, education, and higher incarceration rates.

While the Latino middle-class group has grown, there remains structural discrimination and “downward mobility” amongst many in the Latino community, especially within third and fourth generation Mexican Americans (Telles and Ortiz 2008). The fact that many of the participants in this study traced their heritage to Mexico, as children of Mexican immigrants (second-generation), immigrants themselves (first-generation), or in the case of Gloria, a 4<sup>th</sup> generation Chicana, lends support to their characterization as the “children of the sleeping giant.” Their experiences in 2006 offer interesting insight into how they understand racism in U.S. society as well as why they connected with the plight of undocumented people.

During the 2006 actions much of the organizing by high school activists took place within school walls and in direct response to both local and national issues. This includes the mobilization of rallies, walkouts, and classroom discussions. These events offer a unique opportunity to examine retrospectively the school as a site of political activism and the potential impact of school officials and others on the political manifestations. Furthermore, “the classroom- where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed- is a central site for the construction of social and racial power” (Roithmayr 1999, p.5). This means that the emergence of a social movement within the educational institution would have to contend for legitimacy and power with school officials. Critical race theory and its sub-area, Latino critical race theory, “do not view race as peripheral or incidental to the experiences of people of color, rather, race, racialization, and racism are central to such narratives.”(Fernandez 2002, p. 48). Put differently, the lived experiences and understandings of participants from the 2006 youth-led social movement serves to provide empirical and theoretical insights from epistemologically marginalized positions.

### **The classroom, a site of contention and support**

An array of research has noted the powerful role of educational policy on a school’s context, such as curriculum and school practices (Kozol 1991; Valenzuela 1999; Bowles and Gintis 2002; and Gillman 2005). This also includes critical race scholars, who have found schools to be arenas of racial oppression and empowerment for students of color (Solorzano and Villalpando 1998; Velez et al. 2008). In poverty stricken communities, schools and more specifically teachers and classrooms can also

serve as sites of oppression or empowerment. For example, for refuges of street violence, the classroom offers the space for students to discuss and share their perspective. While the theoretical debate and empirical findings demonstrate the dichotomous or contradictory contexts within schools and classrooms, the consensus is that the schools have the potential to be both sanctuaries and/or oppressive spaces. However, little discussion has been made about the role of schools during a period of social movement activism. Therefore, I attempt to build onto critical race theory by demonstrating that schools are also places of contention and repression during political activism. I argue that during times of political activism schools are a reflection of inequality and marginalization when students of color seek to make political claims and that schools become important spaces for activists to organize, gain knowledge, acquire support and resources for the movement.

Ramona who identified as being a second-generation Hispanic and Latina, provided evidence during her interview of racial framing of youth of color, as well as the school context (i.e. lack of support). Her high school was located in South Los Angeles, an area historically characterized by poverty. When asked to described her school in 2006, she stated, “the school was a reflection of the community, African American, Latino students, almost all of us low-income; predominantly male teachers of color taught in the school [and] they were Latino or black, again a representation of the community.” While she mentions the racial make-up of the school, faculty, and surrounding community, Ramona does not link the plight of her community to racism. Clearly, systemic racism scholars would note the characteristics of her community as

being all too common amongst economically marginalized communities as a result of racism and discrimination in hiring practices and the inferior conditions of these neighborhood's schools. But Ramona went further in detailing the academic and social context of her school:

We were seen as a lost cause. I think a lot of the students felt like that, that people (school officials) didn't really see much from us. They didn't see, I never felt like people thought we were going places, you know, like 'oh look at Garvey High School those kids are going to go far. At the time I was part of the magnet program at my school and I still didn't feel like much was expected of us, specifically me, a Latina. I wanted to go to college [...] I saw the push from some teachers but it was pretty much who ever can make it, can make it (Ramona, Los Angeles).

Ramona's educational experience speaks volumes to the context of her school, as a disempowering environment. For example, she was a motivated student taking part in a magnet program. However, she felt that her background and lack of institutional support hindered her ability to "make it," to attend college and achieve upward mobility. The lack of academic support and low or non-existent expectations seen in Ramona's school is characteristic of the conditions facing many low-income students in inferior schools and such inequalities serve to perpetuate themselves (Kozol 1991).

As stated earlier, critical race theorists have also found that the classroom and by default, teachers can serve as important resource for empowerment (Solorzano and Villalpando 1998 and Roithmayr 1999). During a student-led social movement, such empowerment spaces could serve as a resource. This was the experience for Juan, a self identified Mexican-American. He acknowledged the role that one particular teacher played during the period of social activism in 2006 as for Juan and many of his peers this was their first form of social activism. Juan said:



We knew that she supported immigrant rights, like she would say, ‘well the rules say I have to make this announcement, but you guys do what you have to (in reference to the protest).’ She didn’t advocate we do anything but at the same time, we felt support from her to question what was going on in politics (Juan, San Diego).

Juan’s teacher while maintaining a “neutral position,” provided a space for students to discuss H.R. 4437. Juan and his peers felt that her interest in the matter demonstrated an emotional support. Similarly, Cecilia, a second-generation, female student from East Los Angeles highlighted her experience with a teacher. Cecilia said:

I remember one classroom that my teacher brought it up because you know, elephant in the room. She wanted to know what we felt about it. We were all confused and angry; you know what does this mean or what’s going to happen. And she stated the facts about it (H.R. 4437) not her bias. But after the bell rang, she said to some of us who stayed longer and kept talking, ‘go, go do something about it.’ ... Some of the teachers were also against the bill and maybe activists themselves, they didn’t say or try to make us stay. They were like, ‘you do what you want to do, what you have to do.’ And the students were like, ‘yeah,’ we we’re all very much on the same page (Cecelia, Los Angeles).

While Juan’s teacher didn’t actively take a stance for or against the student’s social activism, she provided a “safe space” for the discussion of politics and allowed students to share their perspectives. Concerned youth were able to dialogue, build their knowledge and opinion of H.R. 4437. Teachers such as Juan’s served as an emotional and political resource for student activists and aided in their empowerment through dialogue with one another by encouraging informed discussion. Cecilia’s teacher also provided a space for dialogue, resulting in a rising of *insurgent consciousness*.

Furthermore, Cecilia’s teacher legitimized the students’ feelings towards H.R 4437 and encouraged them to “go and do something about it (H.R. 4437).” As Cecilia notes, the event provided the opportunity for students to get on the same page, build solidarity

among students and organize action.

Few participants mentioned the availability of such resources in their schools and even fewer recalled the existence of organizations on their campuses dealing with the political issues affecting the Latino community. One exception however, was Hugo from Los Angeles, a second-generation male, who self-identified as Mexican. He stated:

I remember hearing about H.R. 4437 before it became big. Our social studies teacher told us. Of course we were disgusted and offended, so we started preparing.

[Researcher] did you have an organization?

Yeah, we had started it after winter break. Our meetings were small but got huge after the walkouts started. That teacher was our advisor. The discussions were very import for our understanding...we were ready when the walkouts happened (Hugo, Los Angeles).

Both Hugo and Cecelia's teachers provided avenues for political discussions and consciousness building. Cecilia's teacher encouraged students to take action, "you do what you have to do," these are significant words coming from a person of authority and served as a resource for transformation. However, it also important to note that Cecilia's teacher's support was not much more than a "blessing," as it lacked the structural or organization resources. Consequently, due to the absence of support Cecilia and her classmates school were unable to mobilize against and overcome the repression students would face from non-supportive actors (an issues I will discuss further in chapter 5). On the other hand, Hugo's social studies teacher became an organizational advisor and proved to be important for their preparation and political consciousness. Hugo's experience within the organization was critical for preparing these students to take action. His case was unique and an exception rather than the rule.

Social movement scholarship would argue that organizational strength would be

central to the success of any movement; therefore, we would expect to see weak or disjointed activity from activists with little or no organization. Participant's interviews into this topic provided various insights. In some cases students were organized, often as schools and not organizations. Their organizational capacities varied and were often impacted by both the school context and by access to resources, including supportive teachers. Dalia from northern San Diego noted how her school had no Latino organizations but that community people began to fill roles as leaders yelling chants and other helping to stop cars as they marched through the streets. Others like Ernesto from San Diego had access to organizational experience and community contacts. Both, community resources and prior organization skills served as resources for students who were confronted by authorities (i.e. police) and helped them take leadership roles within their schools movement. Ernesto stated:

I was actually part of the student body that year so I was very limited in what I could do, being a study body representative and I was also an organizer in a [student] organization... As the days progressed it got bigger and organizations like StuOrg [student organization] started taking more of a lead and other school's StuOrgs and community organizations were there to make sure we were safe from police (Ernesto, San Diego).

Differing from Ernesto's organizational and community resources, a participant from Los Angeles explained his school context as apolitical but academically supportive. In the case of Simon, a second-generation, self-identified Mexican-American, he attended a 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade charter school. Almost one half of students were Latino. As Simon said:

Well, my school was really lacking political activists both among students and teachers. We had an organization called Culorg [cultural based student organization]; it was basically a lot of the Latino students who would go to the organization. But the organization was really mostly social. There was also another program called Bookorg [academic based organization], it was strictly

academic about going to college. So there wasn't really any political discussion going on (Simon, Los Angeles).

Simon's school demonstrated support for their Latino population via their academic and culturally based organizations. While these organizations served to foster social gatherings and academic support amongst Latino youth, they did not have nor provided the types of resources needed for social activism such as space for political discussions.

### **Chapter III summary**

In summary, I have traced the development of the underlying conditions at national and local levels, including school contexts with the aim to contextualize the arenas in which political struggle took place. Systemic racism theory would assert that the foundationally racist underpinnings and structures of institutions would form antagonistic and oppressive sites, this is especially true in educational institutions due to the disproportionality in power between youth of color and authorities. I argue that schools were in fact sites of political contention, including academically, social, and politically antagonistic settings, as well as safe spaces where students were given the opportunity to discuss and form their opinion of the proposed immigration legislation. As I documented, students experienced both supportive and oppressive settings that will impact their understanding and actions of students' social activism. One key to such variety rested in the agency of teachers- as they largely control and dominate the process and construction of social and racial power within the classroom.

The local and national political contexts, school context, and the existent of organizational resources formed the underlying conditions from which the student-led

social movement of 2006 emerged. As we move forward in understanding how Latino youth participants conceptualized racism and race in their activism. I highlight the links youth activists draw between the Latino community and themselves, regardless of their personal legal status. Following chapter four's examination of the participants' understandings, reactions, and mobilization, I move into an analysis of repression (chapter five), including the racial framing exerted by school authorities and police in their attempt to quell student's activism.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **POLITICAL THREAT OR RACIALIZED POLITICAL THREAT?**

The goals of this research study are not directly aimed at issues of identity, assimilation, nor acculturation. Emerging from my theoretical dialogue and reflections of participants' experiences, my research study explores how participants viewed and understood race and racism in relation to their community and their social activism. Past research on the Chicano Movement focused heavily on the development of a nonwhite identity for activists, scholars also noted the importance of regional contexts on shaping that identity (Munoz 1989:8). Assimilation and acculturation scholars use identity in relation to the dominant white normative. One example being, American culture or values as being synonymous with the dominant normative of white Americans, they are the standard from which other's values or culture is judged. Therefore, assimilation would view political engagement such as participating in electoral politics as a "measure" to quantifying one's assimilation or acculturation level.

The application of the assimilationist paradigm fails to understand or interrogate how people of color have historically and in present times been largely excluded from exercising their power and have been the subjects of elite white's economic and political agendas. Furthermore, assimilation also fails to understand resistance as a response to racial oppression, especially outside of traditional channels, as in the case of the 2006 social movement, where Latino youth as well as their adult counter-parts were actively challenging white-interest (H.R. 4437) and resisted against white normative identities.

Both critical race and systemic racism scholars understand how the dominant white narratives of identity (i.e. assimilation) fail to conceptualize resistance and a counter narrative (Solorzano et al. 2001; Feagin 2010). Resistance and counter-narratives are both central elements in U.S. race relations, as people of color have often engaged in resistance to white supremacy through a variety of forms such as music, art, political activism, and the development of nonwhite identities (Feagin 2006). It is in this gap that social movements literature and race scholarship intersect and where we can have a clearer understanding of what race and racism mean for and how they impact the experiences of Latino youth activists' mobilizations. Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to examine and understand how youth activists understood race and racism in their organized resistance to H.R. 4437 in relation to themselves and the greater context.

With the support of interview data from participants of the 2006 social movement, I postulate that the H.R. 4437 bill was understood as a *racialized political threat*. This means that youth activists saw the proposed immigration legislation as targeting the liberty and safety of their community as well as themselves. In their resistance youth activists displayed a counter narrative to the bills' racialized language and goals. In applying Almeida's (2003), *political threat model*, it is expected to see social mobilization in response to H.R. 4437, but *political threat* does not address the racial nature of H.R. 4437. To address this gap, I extend the theory to develop *racialized political threat* and use participants' narratives to examine whether they understood it as such.

In previous study by a Latino critical race scholar on activism, the researcher

found that Latino youth expressed solidarity and commitment to social justice for their families and communities (Delgado Bernal 2002). Despite their racialized status and social conditions such as poverty, inferior schools, and antagonistic school environments, students of color have often participated in community activism (Ginwright and James 2002). Similar to earlier periods of anti-immigrant sentiment such as the 1930s, 1950s, and 1990s the period prior to the 2006 student social movement was witness to a heightened context of social and political repression against Latinos.<sup>11</sup>

Based on the *political process model*, one might expect to see a swell of resistance. However, this was not the case. Where social movement theorists would recognize that the growing discourse on immigration both in public sphere and elite political circles might signal an opportunity, there did not exist a mass-based movement by either adults or youth to push for immigration reform. Additionally, *PPM*'s two other major "ingredients" were also largely missing, insurgent consciousness and organizational strength. However, by March of 2006, youth led protest, rallies, marches and classroom discussions were organized across U.S. cities.

*Political threat* highlights how policies that are deemed a danger to the rights or benefits of a group can serve as a catalyst (Almeida 2003). In extending the concept of political threat I acknowledge the historical and contemporary racialization and racial system Latino/as have been subject to, as Cobas et al. (2009) explain, [...] a white-

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<sup>11</sup> The Minutemen Project was found by Jim Gilchrist, in October 2004 and mobilized its anti-immigrant camps in 2005. It claimed to be doing the job that the federal government had failed to do, protect the border. They called for increase militarization of the border and increased deportation and criminalization of undocumented immigrants (Walsh, 2008).



created and white-imposed racial hierarchy and continuum, now centuries old, with white Americans at the very top and black Americans at the very bottom (p.1). Therefore, I argue that Latino/a youth activists conceptualized H.R. 4437 as a *racialized political threat*, meaning the bill was understood in racial terms by youth activists, where they saw the Latino community, both documented and undocumented as subject to the intentions and goals of H.R. 4437's racial objectives. In viewing H.R. 4437 as a racialized threat, youth activists sided with their communities' interest and well being, sparking some of the largest political demonstrations by Latino/a youth in decades.

### **Identifying and resisting political threat**

In asking participants, "how did you identify in regards to background in 2006?" Many participants detailed and related their identity beyond their personal connection to a term (i.e. Latino, Chicano, Mexican-American), rather they noted family, extended family, politics, culture, and community as reasons why they identified a certain way. Of the twenty-four participants; ten identified as Mexican/a, four identified as Mexican-American; five identified with Chicano/a, four participants identified with pan-ethnic terms, Latino/a or Hispanic; and one participant did not identify with any term.

For example, Cesar, a high school senior in 2006 from the greater Los Angeles, California, his background and identity created political, social, and both personal and familial connections between himself and the proposed immigration bill (H.R. 4437). As Cesar explains:

[Researcher] during the time of the walkouts, how did you identify?"  
I remember identifying in 2006 as Mexican American, both my parents are immigrants and got their papers after the 80s IRCA law. But we always

empathized with this bill because, we still have a lot of family that would be impacted, you know, it hit home with a lot of family members. So I immediately thought about my *tios* (uncles) and *tias* (aunts), because they don't have legal statuses (Cesar, Los Angeles).

Other participants also created links between themselves and their activism. For example, Sandra, from East Los Angeles, was not an immigrant and claimed she did not use or believe in identity labels, but she understood H.R. 4437 in both personal and community terms. Sandra said:

We are immigrants, my mother was undocumented; my father is undocumented and it's just that struggle all around with us *raza* (people), that we have to really be careful and watch our backs. And I feel that even though it wasn't hitting us, like my mom's kids personally since we are all documented. We are still one family that have to fight this together. If one falls we all fall (Sandra, East Los Angeles).

Sandra's statement calls attention to the ever present danger undocumented people are at risk of, including their families and community. The status of undocumented people not only represents the absence of legal documentation but it also represents a lack of power. It means at any time, one could be subject to deportation, regardless of the time you have spent in the United States or whether your children are citizens. Although, Sandra was a U.S. born citizen she clearly worries for the safety of her community and those family members who still have undocumented status. Furthermore, she links herself to their precarious status, while at the same time recognizing she is not in that situation. Both similarly and contrasting Sandra, another participant, Reyes saw himself linked and in solidarity with first-generation and other Latino origin youth. Additionally, he displays a clear understanding of the racial nature of the H.R. 4437 bill. Reyes explains:

There was a lot of unity amongst a lot of us, even though most of us were born in the US and were Mexican American, I think we understood the implicit

racialized words used in the bill and how it might affect family members (Reyes, San Diego).

Others such as Emiliano, a first-generation immigrant, created political links to their involvement. Although Emiliano was born in Mexico and moved to the United States as a child, he identified as Chicano. Emiliano explains:

Nationality, I'm Mexican, but I identify as Chicano as well and Latino. I was born to in Mexico and came to the USA in 2000, but when I came here (USA) I started learning about the word, Chicano, as someone who belongs to this land and the label has a history of fighting back (Emiliano, San Diego).

Each Cesar, Sandra, and Emiliano's comments demonstrated an understanding of their involvement in the social movement in 2006, in relation to their personal context, as well as ethnic politics and histories. This means that they viewed the proposed legislation in a racialized nature, including H.R. 4437's intentions and potential impact. For example, Tanya, a second-generation Latina, highlights several issues such as fear, resistance, and the lack of power within the Latino/a community in relation to the U.S. racial system.

Tanya said:

Like I said, its fear, they are putting fear into us. They want us to be afraid to be here so we won't be here. You know, they want, the people who are really making these bills happen, they are scared of our potential of our ability to rise up and defend ourselves. And that's our freedom, we are not free here, we are constantly in a struggle- especially Latinas and Latinos, we are definitely in a struggle; they want to be rid of us (Tanya, Los Angeles).

Tanya's analysis of the proposed immigration legislation provides support that some youth activists understood the racialized nature of the bill. In particular, she notes the oppression suffered by the Latino community, such as having to deal with the fear imposed by elite lawmakers, "the people who are really making these bills happen."

Secondly, Tanya suggests lawmakers are themselves fearful of the powerful force the

Latino community somberly represents. Tanya's response also situates Latinos within the racial hierarchy, as subjected to the power and goals of those outside the community. Additionally, she views Latinos as putting forth resistance to these white-on-Latino racial threats.

The narratives provided by Tanya, Cesar, Emiliano, and Sandra each provide a sense of resistance, the counter to an ongoing oppression of their community. While none of these participants contextualized their view of struggle to the historical resistance waged by communities of color, one can clearly see the action and sentiments of these youth could easily fit within past periods of resistance. The thread of resistance continues in the next section, as Latino youth activists' detail their views of the racialized nature of H.R. 4437.

### **Racialized politics and threat**

In examining the history of violence in the southwest, a place where Mexican origin populations have been concentrated, Carrigan and Webb (2009), note the use of elite white state agencies and the legal system as instruments in the oppression against the Mexican community. This includes the use of violence and terror by policing agencies such as the Texas rangers (Carrigan and Webb 2005; Cobas et al. 2009). Similarly, in both the 1930s the *Repatriation* program and the 1950s *Operation Wetback*, racism was very much part of demonizing and criminalizing the Mexican and Latino community.

The legacy of racialized legislation and state action as well as contemporary examples are understood in very difference manners by social movement and race

scholars, for example systemic racism theory and critical race theory would recognized race and racism as central components in the H.R. 4437 legislation, stemming from an institutionally racist system which sought to buttress white supremacy via the criminalization of undocumented and by extension their communities. However, race scholars speak little of the emergence of social movements in response to such policy.

Social movement theorists utilizing the *political process model* would highlight these racist policies as providing “cognitive cues capable of triggering the process of cognitive liberation while existent organization afforded insurgents the stable group-settings within which that process is most likely to occur” (McAdam 1999:51). Again, there is a contradiction in explaining the emergence of organized resistance amongst youth of color. Here, we see evidence of a counter-framing from communities of color who having experienced racial marginalization and developed a counter to the dominant white framing of their community.

The youth participants of the 2006 social movement, demonstrated the centrality of these counter-frames by conceptualizing H.R. 4437 as a, *racialized political threat*. Thus serving to activate many of them for the first time into political activism, for example, Joaquin, a second-generation, self-identified Mexican from South Central Los Angeles responded.

I think a lot of us were like, oh shit; they’re coming after my family. So I knew I had to do something. I feel like we are from here, this was once Mexican land and before it was Indian land. And they’re trying to dehumanize us and deport us all [...] if you look at the part of the bill that went into protecting the US/Mexico border and the US/Canadian border, the want to militarize “con todo” (with everything), weapons wire, more agents. You start to get that sense, yeah they’re talking about you buddy. No one else, when they talk about immigration or have

news reports, they show us. Not others or even others who over stay their visas or are white. It was for us straight up (Joaquin, Los Angeles).

Joaquin's response highlights several key components of a political threat, for example, he states that both he and his family are in danger and notes that "they" (politicians) are talking about him when discussing the threat of immigration in a criminalizing manner. Despite feeling criminalized by the media and anti-immigrant actors, he "plants his feet in the ground" literally, "I feel like we are from here, this was once Mexican land and before it was Indian land." Such a statement counters the dominant white narrative of westward expansion and manifest destiny. Furthermore, Joaquin demonstrates that he viewed H.R. 4437 in racial and politically threatening terms, thereby sparking his action to "do something." Similarly, Nancy, a second-generation self identified Mexican who in 2006 was a high school sophomore from Northern San Diego viewed the "cross-hairs" on herself and her community.

Yeah, a lot of it, they were targeting Latinos. It was basically known, when people (politicians) were speaking about immigration they're talking about Mexicanos. During one of our marches, there was a group of older white men who followed us with signs that said to 'go back to Mexico.' But most of us were citizens, they meant all of us in the law, that is a given (Nancy, San Diego).

Nancy's comment speaks to the racialized nature of H.R. 4437, in "targeting Latinos," and how undocumented immigration is viewed as synonymous with Mexican people. Nancy's also discusses one experience during a march in particular, in which a group of older white men gathered to counter the youth protest. These men followed the largely U.S. born Latino youth with signs readings "go back to Mexico." Although Nancy and many of her fellow activists were U.S. citizens, she identified with the plight of the

undocumented community and understood H.R. 4437 as creating greater racialization and thereby criminalizing her as well.

Like Joaquin and Nancy, race theorists and critical race scholars, also recognize the racially laden language that both implicitly and explicitly targets the Latino community. Simultaneously, such language further inscribes white dominance, as the dominant discourse. For example, the proposed bill was named, “The Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005.” Here, we see the combination of national security issues (terrorism) and “illegal” immigration, and bringing to question, what does a terrorist or illegal alien look like? The criminalizing language is used to justify the marginalization of non-white groups in the United States. The emphasis on border protection also serves to reinforce notions of U.S. and white superiority. Clearly, H.R. 4437’s language used racially linked rhetoric in order to meet its political agenda. This was not lost on many of the youth participants such as Reyes Joaquin, and Ramona (see chapter three).

The following two participants, Ernesto and Camilia, were both born and raised in Mexico but immigrated during their childhood. In articulating their view of immigration, politics, and racism they again highlight the potentially racialized nature of H.R. 4437, as well as linking their activism to defending against such attacks. Camilia states:

The fact it was my people; it got me so mad. I started thinking about my dad and my own family. That is why I went out there. I can only speak for myself, but we come here for the American dream. The American dream every talks about but for us it doesn’t really exist (Camilia, San Diego).

During Camilia's participation in the 2006 she was a freshman in San Diego, but was living in Tijuana, Mexico, her response challenges the dominant narrative of assimilation and the American dream, as she views such a dream as out of her reach. She also strongly aligns her actions with her group membership and family connections. Ernesto, a senior from San Diego and first-generation immigrant had come to view the political uprising as a fight with the racist legislation targeting undocumented Mexicanos. Ernesto said:

I think it was aimed directly at undocumented Mexicanos, I think it's always been an issue with us coming to the United States. We never hear about other groups, like undocumented Filipinos, it's us who are targeted and why we had fight back. We have people in the white house and congress who are racist with their sentiments and straight forward about it, like they call us illegal aliens (Ernesto, San Diego).

Ernesto displays a strong counter-framing of the white normative discourse; he clearly views elite power-holders as racist and using their power to oppress. Furthermore, his response was driven by a necessity to fight back not a political opportunity. Meaning political threat and as Ernesto understood, a racialized political threat, served as a driving force in his attempt to fight the racist and dehumanizing legislation proposal, H.R. 4437. The participants interviewed understood their actions as resisting the criminalization and dehumanizing goals of H.R. 4437, as well as fighting on behalf of their family, relatives, and themselves. Although youth had limited resources and organizational strength they clearly articulated a challenge to the proposed bill. At the same time elite institutions such as media outlets, school officials, and state authorities utilized the dominant framing of youth activists including their racialization. Such as the



use of racially-laden stereotypes serving to delegitimize the authenticity of youth activist's political actions.

For example, the San Diego Union Tribune describe the youth activists as, "[...] hundreds of truants protesting proposed changes in immigration laws have rallied every day this week at Chicano Park."<sup>12</sup> Latino youth are not even named, rather their identity as a racial group is assumed, and they are simply referred as truants. The "common sense" of race, allows the readership to understand and also racialize Latino youth as the truants, thereby unfit to be making political claim. However, Latino youth activists, such as Ernesto highlighted the dehumanizing nature of the discourse used in describe him and others in his community, both citizens and immigrants. As neither his perspective nor "voice" is represented in the newspapers' reporting.

Similarly, Camilia's comments on the farce of the American Dream are voided by the dominant society which views her political activism as mere truancy, but her comments speak volumes on the marginalization of people of color, for Latinos who she saw as, "from here (the U.S.) but hardly of here." Camilia offers a powerful critique of the assimilationist narrative often pushed by school and legal officials. She notes youth's lack of access to the *American dream* and the resources it provides such as legitimacy in the eyes of the law and access to political entities. The exclusion to these resources demonstrates the racial marginalization of communities of color when attempting to

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<sup>12</sup> Moran, Chris. 2006. "A Protest Unmatched in Magnitude, Civility; First Walkouts Transform Into a Variety of Reactions." *San Diego Union Tribune*, April 1, 2006.

engage power structures. For Latino youth activists, the exclusion from traditional political power is even more drastic, as they have limited means to voice their opinion.

The absence of youth activists' *voices* and critical perspectives, while at the same time the privileging of authorities' voices was seen in many news reports covering the 2006 student led protest. For example, Detective John Brimmer, a Grand Prairie police spokesman, was quoted, "Basically, we're just baby-sitting a bunch of kids who have found another excuse to get out of school."<sup>13</sup> Again, Latino youth are portrayed as uneducated and unconcerned with education, a common racial stereotype of Latinos. Race scholars (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008; Feagin 2010), would highlight such comments of Latino youth, as powerful and rich data in documenting the "everyday experiences of racism," this include the language, images, and discourse regarding non-white populations. Therefore, the public demonstrations and marches organized by Latino youth offer the opportunity to analyze the continuing significance of race, moreover, how race and racism impact social movements led by people of color. For example, Victoria, a second generation, self-identified Mexican American, female student from East Los Angeles illustrates that social movement activism was an outlet for her strong desire to defend her community due to the concern of marginalization as a minority. Victoria says:

I wanted to be part of something that's going to contribute to the betterment of our future because, if not we're all going to be continued to be treated as minorities. You know, I feel that I need to have a voice, I need to project my

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<sup>13</sup> Fisher, Kent, Emily Ramshaw, Katherine Leal Unmuth. 2006. "Student Protesters Invade City Hall Hundreds Ordered Back To The Class As Patience Wears Thin". The Dallas Morning News. March 29, 2006

voice, I need to project what I have to say about this and I feel that I need to defend my family. Or be a part of that defense (Victoria, Los Angeles)

Victoria's asserts her desire to voice her perspective on behalf of family and to defend them from the threat of H.R. 4437. Similarly, Marcos, a self-identified Mexican American, from Los Angeles was in the eleventh grade during the 2006 social movement. His words in particular reveal a deep understanding of the potentially repressive climate that a law such as H.R. 4437 would institute and why participants viewed direct actions (i.e. protest, rallies, and confrontation with authorities) as one of the few outlets for youths' *voices* to be heard. As Marcos states:

I think the walkouts was the only way that people- whether or not they took [Latino] youth seriously it was the only way that we were going to voice our frustration and defend our communities. It really came down to 'you're attacking my mom, my uncle, my cousin, whatever it came down to you're attacking me. You're coming at me and I think a lot of people took it very personal. A lot of people saw it as a community issue, an attack on my people" and specifically that form of protest was kinda like, this is the only way you are going to listen to me. Even if you take me as being ignorant it was worth the risk because at least you were doing something (Marcos, Los Angeles).

Marcos' understands Latinos' marginalized position as subject to attacks from more powerful actors and institutions. As Feagin (2006), suggest these powerful actors and institutions are historically and contemporary embedded in systemic racism and serve to buttress white's racial and economic dominance. Also part of the history of systemic racism is the resistance waged by people of color against their oppression. For example, Marcos, who links himself to the defense of his community and whose participation represents the historical resistance of people of color against white racism.

However, a defense is not an offense, herein, the utility of *political threat* is demonstrated as youth protestors were not in a political position to propose opposite

immigration reform, rather they were attempting to protect those in harms way of H.R. 4437's racial goals against the Latino community. While recognizing his limited access to power holders and frustration, Marcos, says the protest were the "only way," regardless of whether (youth) were not taken serious by politicians or not. Furthermore, Marcos clearly views himself and family within the racial hierarchy and in a marginalized position. As the proposed immigration posed a serious threat to the family and community's well-being. Therefore, the necessity to voice opposition via the protest was one of the limited ways in which Marcos could assert his disapproval and resistance to H.R. 4437, regardless of the risk and the racist stereotypical framing of him and his peers.

#### **Chapter IV summary**

In summary, chapter four has examined the centrality of race and racism, as understood by participants of the 2006 social movement. By extending the gaps in the political process model, specifically *political threat*, I have shown that participants not only viewed H.R. 4437 as potentially limiting their rights, well-being, and their freedoms but youth activists understood race and racism as central components of the law and its goals. In response to such *racialized political threats*, activists created links at individual and community levels. In their counter-narrative, they demonstrated knowledge of H.R. 4437 and its political and economic interest as a benefit to the dominant white group and an attack against their own communities.

Much like previous events of resistance amongst marginalized people, Latino youth in my sample organized in defense of undocumented people (i.e. protest against

Prop. 187, 1994). Participants' interviews revealed a deep understanding of the racialized nature of immigration legislation and heightened anti-Mexican sentiment during the period of their social activism. For example, similar to past episodes of Latino youth understood their community to have less rights, this including youth and their ability to make political claims. Secondly, regardless of their nativity status, participants in my sample viewed H.R. 4437 as further criminalizing Latinos regardless of documentation status.

Similar to Velez et al. (2008), participants conceptualized the proposed immigration law as indirectly and directly racializing and targeting specific populations, Latinos. I argue that the 2006 social movement must be viewed as not only a challenge to H.R. 4437 but to the dominant white narrative, which racializes Latinos and uses law as a means to further white interest. In challenging white dominance both Feagin (2006) and Bonilla-Silva (1997) argue that the existence of a racial hierarchy places White Americans' in a dominant position as well as their political and economic interest. Resistance movements against and within institutions of power have historically been met with resistance, as we move into chapter five, we center the voices of youth activists in order to learn of the repression they faced via media, police authorities, and responses from school authorities.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **REPRESSION AND RACE**

U.S. racial politics and arguably all cultural struggles take place within a defined racial and national hegemony. Both critical race theory and systemic racism theory recognize the power of white supremacy as embedded in the institutions of the country, including the institutions of law, education, and politics. Issues of nativity status, citizen privileges, and rights within the context of American politics fall within the category of racial politics in a zero-sum game, where the gains of people of color are believed to take away from the dominant white group. As Feagin (2006) argues, the United States was founded by and with the purpose of advancing elite white interest and a racial hierarchy that positions whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. Furthermore, social movements by communities of color are understood as strikes to the racial order. Unfortunately, social movements and specifically those organized by marginalized groups have historically been met with various levels of repression, including murder, coercion, and institutional cost.

Social movement scholar Tarrow (2011) views repression as the actions and “capacity of authorities to present a solid front to insurgents-that discourage[s] contention” (p.32). Repression is carried out in heightened levels by state agents against threatening contenders (McAdam 1999). Only a handful of scholars have noted differences in levels of repression when activists are people of color, this includes the over-policing of minority-led protests (Davenport et al. 2011). By asserting that state agents respond to threats, scholars are implicitly highlighting that repression is a means to assert social control and preserve the

dominance of the ruling class and or group. In the case of the Latino youth social movement, the school context served as a central arena of organization for activists. Schools in conjunction with police authorities were the front line and each sought to assert control over the actions of student activists within the school and in the streets.

In conceptualizing sites of contention, the school during times of social resistance and mobilization is often overlooked as an arena for political struggle and repression. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the experiences of student activists from the 2006 social movement with school, media, and state agency (police) repression. Specifically, I examine the repression of youth activists by both school officials (i.e. teachers and administrators) and police actors. Central to detailing these events are the voices of student activists who challenged H.R. 4437 by organizing walkouts, protest, teach-ins, and classroom discussions with peers and in some cases, authorities. As Delgado Bernal (2002) asserts, the epistemologies' of youth and their experiences are both theoretically and empirically important because youth are holders and creators of knowledge.

Through their actions the student activists challenged the racialization of their communities and H.R. 4437's potential threat of criminalization, as well as the dominant racial framing of youth of color. I aim to demonstrate that the responses of school officials and police largely aimed to delegitimize Latino student's political claims and to stop youth organizing- this included threats of suspension, expulsion and failing grades, withholding them of participating in school events such as graduation and prom, monetary citations for truancy, police intimidation, arrest, and physical violence.

## Repression in the schools

The majority of participants in my sample (17 of 24) experienced what can be categorized as repression. They reported repression coming from teachers, police, and school administration; additionally, a handful of activists also mentioned the negative media representation their actions received (i.e. newspapers and television reports of protest). For example, Ramona, who was a high school Junior attending a majority Black and Latino school in south Los Angeles, reported on repression coming from administrators. She explained that following the *Gran Marcha* in downtown Los Angeles, she and her peers organized a school walkout on March 26, 2006. She noted that the walkout caught administrators “off-guard” as the school emptied into the streets. Students gathered and marched to the local city hall. They demanded a stop to H.R. 4437 and carried signs and mainly Mexican flags as symbols of their resistance against the proposed legislation. However, in the following days both police and school officials launched measures to limit their ability to organize more protests. Ramona explained:

We had school police patrolling on the inside; there was also riot police all around the inside and outside of the school. There was no way we could organize another protest. The locks on gates were changed. It was big, they amped security to the max.

[Researcher] you said there was riot police; do you remember what the police were wearing?

I remember the ones on the outside had like SWAT gear or rioting gear, covered in armor. There were also a lot of them [police] inside the school on the quad, some had their batons out and they were lined up facing the students.

[Researcher] What was the student’s response to that?

I just remember just thinking, what is going on? I hadn’t seen that much security since the riots we had in our school. It wasn’t the first time students had seen that, but it was the first time we had seen it for something [student protest] that wasn’t violent. They [police] acted the same way as in a riot, like they equated a riot without walkouts (Ramona, Los Angeles).



Ramona's high school is located in a majority black and Latino community where racial conflict between both groups sometimes manifests on campus and off campus. Students were "accustomed" to seeing police on their campus, but the week of the social activism was a new and highly contentious period. In describing the "occupation" by police, Ramona's experience is shedding light on the repression launched by officials via police intimidation. Within the school walls police were dressed in riot gear- padded uniforms, armed, and displaying batons as they lined up as a show of strength facing the largely Black and Latino student body. The ability of students to mobilize another event was thwarted in view of the possible consequences if they decided to protest.

In seeking to assert their political discontent against the criminalization of their community, Latino youth were met with superior force by police authorities. Systemic racism theory views police as an extension and vehicle of the white power structures to maintain "social order" and are controlled by elite white interest (Feagin 2010). The powerful imagery provided by Ramona's words clearly demonstrates the willingness to use force by authorities against a population they saw as a potential threat to the power structure within the school and the dominant racial order. Police and school officials carried out similar repression during the protest and considered the youth's actions as equally violent as racial riots; however, according to Ramona, she and her peers did not use violence when making political claims.

Similar to Ramona's testimony, several participants described highly repressive police presence on their campuses and interactions with that included physical confrontation and arrest. Joaquin, who also attended a school in south central Los

Angeles like Ramona, described a highly repressive environment. He indicated that he and his peers had formed an organization which mobilized students against H.R. 4437 and put forward demands to remove the school principle and expand Black and Latino studies courses. The response from school administration demonstrated that they were not keen to listen to the students' demands and sought to gain control over the school.

Joaquin said:

Our school became more and more hostile. By mid-April it felt like I was going to a JUVI [juvenile jail center], they wanted to stop us. I was suspended for passing out fliers, but we kept going the whole spring and into the summer (Joaquin, South Central Los Angeles).

Joaquin's school had effectively become a detention center in his eyes. Even non-confrontational actions such as distributing flyers became grounds for the educational institution to flex its power via suspensions. Similarly, Ernesto's experience with repression highlights the use of policing power and tactics such as lockdowns to shutdown the student's mobilization. The presence of police was commonplace in many of the student's schools, as Ernesto explained:

Yeah there was [police presence], I don't remember if anyone got arrested but I remember Monday and Tuesday was easier to walk out, the gates were still open. But later on they locked the school down, actually locked the doors and all the gates. There was also police surrounding the campus. I remember seeing cops walking around the school and outside the gates... we learned that the administrators were going to take more actions to lock us down, so we decided to just congregate outside and not even enter the school. We went straight to City College [community college], we decided not to go inside, that was a strategy for us to keep the walkout going (Ernesto, San Diego).

Ernesto was one of three participants who was part of a politically oriented organization. He also had experience as a student leader on his campus and used his position within the school to gather relevant information for the students' counter-tactics. For example,

when he became informed that administration was planning to lock down the school, Ernesto and other student organizers mobilized their peers to meet outside of the school gates and march to the local community college, a counter to the planned lock-down. Nonetheless, police presence inside the school again sought to take control of the situation and both police and administration operated with the assumption that students were a) not informed, b) not organized, and c) posed a threat to the school and/or society. Therefore, the use of physical and institutional repression aimed to limit the ability of students to demonstrate and effectively heighten the cost of social activism.

Ernesto, Joaquin, and Ramona were all in indirect confrontation with policing powers and agents and were subjected to institutional consequences such as suspensions. However, their actions during the mobilization and subsequent weeks in the spring of 2006 demonstrated that students were developing organizational capacity to build their social movement.

### **Repression of public protest**

Police agents also used physical force outside of the school to assert their authority over student protesters. Karen, a high school freshman in the spring of 2006 in San Diego, provides an example of this type of repression. Her school was nearly 100 percent Latino (Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano), in fact Karen lived in Tijuana, Mexico, as did many of her peers and crossed the U.S.-Mexico border daily to attend school. Her case was one of two participants interviewed that had direct confrontation with police outside of the school grounds. Karen described her experience:

I protested 3 times, the third day I was arrested. I remember that day there were a lot of cops and principles outside, you know the people who are suppose to protect you. They threaten us, saying we'd be suspended. So I didn't go into the school, I went with the kids on the street and they had posters and Mexican flags and then we started marching down the main street to the park... half the school was marching and the police told us we could not go to the park or they'd arrest us. Then it was like an action movie, vans with swat teams and cop cars with sirens started coming after us, I remember kids being scared and running through the park.

[Researcher] Why the intensity by the police, did you guys have weapons? No! (laughing), no we had signs and flags. Some people had maracas (musical instrument) we really looked like a crowd going to a soccer game. But like I said, it was the whole swat team with batons and mask. I got so scared. I started running with my friend when they started attacking us. It was horrible. I got grabbed by the neck and thrown down to the ground. I was crying and they put the handcuffs on me and put me in one of the vans (Karen, San Diego).

Karen's experience demonstrates the use of physical violence from police on Latino youth activists and was very similar to Francisco's, a second-generation, self-identified Chicano who was a senior in San Diego. On the second day of his school's protest, students marched to a local park; it was a relatively small group of less than 50 students. As they walked down the sidewalk several police squad vehicles followed behind the youth activists, as Francisco explains when as he was reaching the park the lead police car drove onto the sidewalk blocking the students path. Police agents began approaching the youth activists on foot. Two officers tackled Francisco and his face was shoved into the grass as police placed plastic handcuffs on him, afterwards he was placed in the officer's vehicle and taken back to school.

Francisco was punished for his involvement in the march. He was given ten hours of community service and forced to write and hand deliver a letter of apology to the local police department. Francisco stated, "I didn't think I did anything wrong, but they made me feel I did and write a letter for leaving school" (San Diego). Francisco's

case particularly demonstrates the use of state agents to repress political claims as well as documents school officials' support and utilization of state policing agencies to physically assert social control and authority over the student's actions. Francisco's punishment served to demoralize his actions and negate their legitimacy.

The experience of these participants reveals the both coordinated efforts by school officials and police to repress student activism. Similar to other studies on people of color's experience with police, the students were met with greater force than required; baton against maracas (Latin musical instrument), swat members verse 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and increased criminalization of youth of color. Such events support recent literature on the "protesting while being non-white." For example, in Davenport et al. (2011) study, the researchers described a protest comprised of mainly African American activists that was met with heighten and greater levels of force by police- both numbers of officers and greater policing (i.e. crowd control). Essentially, protesting for black or brown comes with greater cost.

While critical race theory is focused on the law and the use of legal institutions to reproduce the racial order, CRT also offers the methodological practices of using the "voice" of marginalized actors. Clearly, the experience of these participants demonstrates the willingness of school authorities to use force and threat of force against youth of color during social movements. Critical race theorists have highlighted the school's ability to serve as oppressive and emancipatory contexts, I have demonstrated that schools can become highly contentious sites and utilize repression during social activism by youth of color.

## **Classroom repression**

As shown, Latino youth-led protest, walkouts, and marches were seen as threats to the power structures and met with physical and institutional repression from policing agencies and school administrations. While the majority of participants' noted schools as sites of repression and threats, the classroom was more varied and according to interviews some teachers offered safe spaces, emotional and political support, while others delegitimized student's actions and/or channel students away from social protest with academic threats. For example, Mercedes, a second-generation youth from San Diego, but self-identified as Mexicana, she noted how a teachers and in particular an Advance Placement (A.P.) course reacted to the wave of protest by Latino and Latina students. Mercedes said:

Some teachers were really angry, they said we would fail and not be allowed to graduate. I was in A.P. classes and one of the few Mexicanas. I remember the teacher gave quizzes on purpose that week and me and the other Mexican kids missed them. A lot of teachers made us feel dumb, saying we didn't know what we were doing (Mercedes, San Diego).

Mercedes and her Mexican peers were subjected to academic coercion in their Advance Placement class, moreover, it demonstrates the institutional cost paid by youth activists.

Latinos in the class, where also belittled for their activism and made to feel inferior.

While many participants in the case study have articulated political, racial, and personal understanding of H.R. 4437 and the precipitating events. School officials and teachers in particular those who viewed youth activists as uninformed and therefore unfit to make political claims demonstrate the power of racially laden stereotypes. By centering race theories and recognizing that they work at the ideological and individual levels, we can

conceptualized that statements aimed to discredit youth activists operated from racialized constructs of who has legitimacy to make political claims and act in their groups interest and who is repressed for doing so (non-whites).

### **Media and youth protest**

In the days following the famous *Gran Marcha* in Los Angeles, California, both *The San Diego Union Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times* reported widespread protest and student walkouts from each cities' high schools. As a major outlet for news reports and legitimizing force, particularly during periods of social mobilizations, the media plays a significant role in framing the events and participants. In other words, media frames the issue. It suggest to other media organizations, elites, and the public who the serious players are on a given issue, “[s]ocial movements can influence public policy, alter political alignments, and raise the public profile and salience of particular issues” (Meyer 1996:1634). Therefore, the use of racial stereotypes and racialized framing of activism serves to delegitimize Latino youth’s actions.

Past research by race scholars has documented the racial framing in public discourse regarding U.S. Latinos both undocumented immigrants as problematic to the social foundations of America (Santa Ana 2002; Perez Huber 2010). The media is particularly vital for the success of social movement, “Media plays a significant role to social movements (1) reaching general public, to acquire approval and participation; (2) can link movements with other political and social actors; and (3) provide psychological support for members” (Klandermans1996:319). Here again, from the review of the literature social movement theory makes little distinction in how race and racism impact

the reporting and framing of minority-led social movements, especially those carried out by youth.

The *White Racial Frame*, by Feagin (2006) provides two important concepts for understanding the racialized framing of people of color, the *white racial frame (WRF)* outlines two components, *hard racial framing* and *soft racial framing*, the latter represents the overtly racist discourse which positions whites as biologically and culturally superior, while the former (soft) represents the “coded” language which limits the salience of race and covertly positions whites as superior and people of color as less than (p.19). The use of racialized framing and coded is seen in the long history of immigration policy, for example in the case of proposition 187 in 1994.

[...] Governor Wilsons reelection bit, immigrants were shown masses at the California-Mexico border as an announcer ominously spoke, “they keep coming.” These advertisements play into the fears of crime that many Americans feel in today’s society. The undocumented are cast as a threat to not only the economic security of California, but also the personal safety of Californians (Garcia 1995).

The racialized meanings are encoded on the language and construct the image of a threat to white America, the immigrant. Similarly, the 2006 youth social movement was racialized, as racial stereotypes and images were utilized to socially construct the student activists, as well as justification for repression under the guise of safety.

For example, an online news report by San Diego’s ABC-10 News, socially constructs the image of the Latino youth via coded-language, describing protestors as



truants, criminals, and violent.<sup>14</sup> At the same times, the report gives voice to the Major of San Diego, Mayor Jerry Sanders (R) and two Vista Unified School District officials (North County San Diego), Board Trustee Jim Gibson, calls on board colleagues to support having law enforcement arrest students who walk out of class for truancy violation.

In both cases education and public officials delegitimize the actions of youth activist. Furthermore, Vista Unified School District, Superintendent Taylor, argues that students will cause “trouble,” in doing so he is using the racialized stereotype of delinquency to construct the image of Latino youth; and Trustee Gibson clearly articulate the willingness to use force to control the student’s actions, under of guise of order. Just based on the sheer number of walkouts it is likely that some students were not “informed” or were participating to join the crowd, however, undoubtedly, their participation served as an educational experience with American politics and race which could simply not be replicated in the classroom.

As discussed earlier many youth activists were keenly aware of the implications of H.R. 4437 and created political, cultural, and personal critiques of the *racialized political threat*; some participants’ experiences highlight how student activist were very much engaged in the political moment (a counter to the dominant framing of Latino

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<sup>14</sup> San Diego’s ABC-10 News. 2006. “Thousands of Students March During Immigration Protest: Mayor Issues Warning Against Protest During School Hours.” Retrieved March 22, 2013 (<http://www.10news.com/news/thousands-of-students-march-during-immigration-protest>).

youth as uneducated or delinquents) and even followed the reporting of other students' actions. For example, Leah a high school Junior from Los Angeles:

So I remember watching the news and seeing that the media was saying that students just wanted to cut school, saying we were deviant and just did not want to be in class. For me it was very tough to hear that, I was the kind of student that was very disciplined, in honors classes and A.P. For [media] to totally disregard what we were doing and saying we didn't know why we were out in the streets, for me it was very frustrating to see the reports on us (Leah, Los Angeles).

Similarly, others across Southern California like Gloria stated, "I was glued to the TV watching students and watching videos people were making." While officials viewed student's against from the white racial frame and as a challenge to the social order, therefore warranting physical and institutional repression, Gloria was empowered and politically engaged by her activism. Joaquin, from South Central L.A. shared:

I watched a lot of reports. I remember watching them on TV. I would see students walking out all over the place. They would show one school walking out after another, after another. Umm, I saw a group a kids on the freeway. I remember one group of kids on the freeway holding up signs and marching [...] They carried signs in English and in Spanish, like "stop hr4437" "*estas mi tierra y mi lucha* (this is my land and my struggle)" I remember those, because we also had them at my school (Joaquin, Los Angeles).

Joaquin's statement reveals that news reports showing student demonstrators across the country allowed for him to feel connected to other Latino youth activists, he was part of the social movement with a common purpose and in solidarity to challenging the proposed racist H.R. 4437. Also significant is the use of the protest slogan, "*estas mi tierra y mi lucha*" because it highlights the student activists' own framing of their struggle for social justice as marginalized people in the U.S. The *White Racial Frame*, recognizes the resistance to racial framing by communities of color, both in the ability of marginalized groups to recognize and understand racialize means of oppression and in

the ability of communities of color to assert their own counter-frame (Feagin 2010:168), such as recognizing the immigrant struggle as racialized oppression and standing in solidarity with affect communities and people.

### **Counter-framing, reflections of empowerment and resistance**

For many of the Latino youth participants I interviewed, their social movement activism in 2006 was the first time they had engaged in any type of direct resistance to racism and political marginalization. However, their actions are clearly part of a tradition of resistance. As Feagin (2010), asserts Americans of color have fought against racial oppression in a variety of levels, including countering the dominant white racial framing; for example, the development of anti-oppression counter-frames and frames based on home cultures are both two significant sources (p.180-181). As shown, Latino youth activists challenged school policies, faced police and school authorities, dealt with a variety of threats (institutional and legal), as they sought make their political claims disapproving H.R. 443. Their analysis of both the legislative proposal, H.R. 4437, and how they understood race and racism in their actions suggest that activist were engaging elements of counter-framing and home-culture frames.

The home-culture frames demonstrates an opposition to the dominant cultural values in U.S. society, this can include cultural values or preferences in language, food, music, and religion. Feagin (2010), also notes that implicit lessons are part of the Latino counter-frame for maintaining dignity and pride, at times a critique and direct challenge to white supremacy (i.e. the Chicano Movement and its anti-racist/anti-oppression frame); as well as, home-culture frames, as they serve as a base for less direct resistance

to white cultural dominance (p.189). In reflection, Latino youth activists took away many lessons on race in the U.S., and for some, the events cemented a commitment to social justice for their community. Additionally, Latino youth activists also confronted critical questions of identity, power, and politics. Again, I utilize the voice of my participants in order to demonstrate the power and learning gained by many. For example, Carlos, was the senior student body president in a Los Angeles charter school.

Carlos said:

I wasn't as politicized, I guess, [the social movement] was like my first steps to being involved with such as activity. I just remember comparing to a few friends of mine who were undocumented and it felt like all of a sudden was, like everyone was venerable to this legislation. We talked about it [and] we began that discussion of issues affecting all of us (Carlos, Los Angeles).

Carlos' reflection of his involvement in the movement speaks to the powerful impact activism had on his developing political consciousness. He recognizes it as his "first steps," specifically, how the proposed H.R. 4437 bill sparked the need to dialogue and understand himself and his peers. He also points out that citizenship was a mute point, as everyone was venerable, a testament to the understanding of H.R. 4437 as a *racialized political threat*. Other participants shared that the movement was a learning experience, an opportunity to engage in the political citizenship of the country and to work towards social justice. For example, Rodolfo stated:

At the time, I was empowered and felt inspired by all those imagines. Especially because it was youth my age, now being older and having more consciousness, I do, looking back we were resisted in what our rights. Like for example, in our government class we talked about the constitution but not how to use our rights. Like we're taught that all the problems are in the past, like slavery and you know, things like that (Rodolfo, San Diego).

Rodolfo's empowerment highlights the significant insight gained through activism on issues of citizenship and social justice. At the same time he recognizes the contradiction in his civics education, where he learned about the constitution, but not how to use his rights. His experience is indicative of CRTs view of the educational system because it holds both the capacity to empower and to marginalize.

Gloria, as a 4<sup>th</sup> generation Chicana of Mexican heritage recognized herself as Mexican due to the dominant society's racialization of her and her community. The shared experience of racialization is Gloria's link to a non-American/ non-white understanding of herself and her outsider status. As Gloria states:

Just being there was powerful. It even changed my vocabulary- I don't use the term illegal, I even check people on it. Even the word undocumented gives the connotation of the legality of migration and I prefer to call people migrants. My participating in the protest, I was reclaiming some of my identity and what it means it be, Mexican, in the U.S. No doubt in my mind that was what it was. Whether I'm fourth, sixth or first generation I'm still Mexican and people see me as that. No matter how many times I want to tell someone I'm American, but your last name is Perez. We been here, my family [has] been here but we are Mexican, plain and simple its who we are and the criminalizing of my community really made me want to be involved. (Gloria, Los Angeles, CA).

Gloria's reflection demonstrates the beginning of a critical counter-frame and clearly uses elements of the home-culture frame (e.g. resisting the dominant white cultural values), as she proudly notes her identity, "My participating in the protest, I was reclaiming some of my identity and what it means it be, Mexican, in the U.S." Gloria also critiques the criminalization of her community, showing how her involvement was driven by a growing political consciousness, as she sought to struggle against social injustices. Gloria was impacted in a multitude of ways, such as her discourse and provided her a counter narrative to legal and illegal migrations. Secondly, her

participation helped shape how she understood the Mexican experience in the United States, as she clearly relates that understanding to the racialization she had experienced and her empowering involvement in the 2006 youth led movement.

Lastly, her reflections of empowerment show a developing understanding of U.S. race relations and the positioning of Latinos, particularly Mexicans, “Whether I’m fourth, sixth, or first generation I’m still Mexican and people see me as that.” Gloria recognizes what race scholars Feagin (2006) and Bonilla-Silva (2001) recognize in their own work, that is, race relations in the United States take place within a racially stratified economic, social, and political system. This means that political claims advanced from communities of color are strikes and threats to the dominant racial hierarchy.

However, such political struggles, as well as cultural occur within vastly unequal power relations. As a Chicano youth activists Gloria has relatively very little power to impact institutions, but elite white institutions have an enormous amount of power to impact her, even as a 4<sup>th</sup> generation youth of Mexican heritage. Nonetheless, Gloria and Carlos’, reflections are powerful testimonies and evidence to document the existence of counter-framing by people of color as they directly and indirectly resist oppression.

## **Chapter V summary**

This chapter examined the repression faced by student activists; through the voices of participants I uncovered the varying degrees of school, police, and media repression. In many cases, repression was justified as a means to gain control over youth who were racialized as “delinquents, unfit to make political claims, and uneducated.”

This was particularly evident in the statements by school officials. Did the student movement suffer repression? Student activists paid for their actions with institutional threats and institutional cost, as well as physical violence, intimidation, and monetary fines. While arrest were not the norm in the student walkouts, they represent a significant willingness of school and state agencies to act in the name of power, thereby enforcing the dominant racial order under the guise of law and order.

Clearly, schools were shown to be significant sites of contention and varied in regards to the experiences of Latino youth activists. At the administrator level, activists faced barriers in organizing walkouts or protest. Some teachers at the classroom level opened the door for dialogue; others intentionally sought to channel student's efforts away from political activism and instituted academic cost for their participation. Lastly, Latino youth's reflections revealed the importance of the movement, at least retrospectively as empowering experiences where race, nativity, and power were questioned, challenged, and defined. The 2006 movement was vital for many of the study's participants in their development of political consciousness and viewing themselves in solidarity with immigrant and undocumented communities due to their racialization.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

This research study's emphasis on the experiences of Latino youth activists demonstrated the important role that race and racism play on social movements led by youth of color. The ideological and power structures of race impact the relationship between marginalized groups and the dominant group. As demonstrated, youth of color and their communities are disproportionally the subjects of policies and not the creators. The underlying conditions of the movement were evident in the racialized language of H.R. 4437 and the public anti-Latino sentiment.

Historically, the Latino community had been politically and economically marginalized, thus limiting their power to influence major institutions. However, through organized struggle and at times social movements, the "people power" had been able to garner victories (i.e. educational and political). The purpose of this study is not to judge the 2006 Latino youth movement in win or lose discourse. Rather it is to contextualize the movement and situate the political contexts within the historical legacy of racialized oppression and resistance to such oppression. During periods of heightened social and political threats; there are greater likelihoods for an organized resistance by people of color. Furthermore, systemic racism theory allows us to understand policy as attempts to maintain and secure racial domination by white America.

Participants in the case study demonstrated an understanding of H.R. 4437 as, *racialized political threats*. In essence the children of the sleeping giant much like the



giant were awoken in this period of political and social upheaval, youth activist understood the political context as anti-immigrant but more specifically as anti-Latino. Implicit in the anti-Latino is the racial hierarchy and power dynamics that all political and cultural battles taken place within the United States. Regardless of status, Latino people were cast as foreigners, criminals, and/or a threat to white America. Their experience and understanding of race, racism, and the anti-immigrant/anti-Latino context facilitated the racialized nature of H.R. 4437 for youth. Consequently, political claims were asserted by Latino youth activists, against H.R. 4437 on the streets of Los Angeles and San Diego, California, as well as within schools.

Similar to other studies by critical race scholars, the educational institutions were both supportive and repressive (Delgado Bernal 2002). However, this study differed in examining such institutions during periods of political contention and highlights the marginalized position of minority youth while at the same time empowering them through their ability to “tell their story.” Telling their story disrupts the normative discourse of white supremacy and as Feagin (2010) asserts, these are in fact *counter-frames* to the dominant frame. As shown both state officials and educational officials (i.e. policy and school official) used power and policing resources to control and repress political actions by students.

Student activists in turn, took to the street to demonstrate their disapproval of anti-immigrant policy and consistently linked their actions to protecting their family. Findings showed activist viewed race and racism as central to their involvement, as well a racialized experiences. Perhaps most significantly, participants demonstrated and

supported the study's concept of *racialized political threat* of H.R. 4437, therefore, contributing to the debate of race and social movement in the United States and meriting further research.

Interactions between youth activists and officials demonstrated the complex nature of social movements and how one's actions can impact the others, for example, school officials locking down campuses or using police to patrol inside and outside the school campus. Additionally, Latino youth activists were shown to be keenly aware of the implications of H.R. 4437 and to be effective and astute political activists, while not all knew the details of the proposed policy or the language to articulate a position- their activism provided that opportunity to engage and challenge their racialization and shape their understanding of themselves, their community, and U.S. race relations.

As a case study, the 2006 Latino youth social movement does not afford us the ability to make generalizable assertions about society; however, through the extended case method I build onto the social movement literature. This study argues that race matters and racial structures greatly impact the emergence and development of movements led by youth of color. One significant outcome seen during the period of the 2006 student led protest was the willingness and mobilization by state and school authorities to stop mobilizations by youth of color. This included the use of police to intimidate and arrest activist, citations, institutional consequences and threats (e.g. suspensions, threats of lower grades), politicians and media delegitimizing student led protest.

Again, as critical race scholars assert, movements organized by people of color represent a threat to white supremacy. On the surface, the actions of these young activists displayed their disapproval to H.R. 4437, but the power of their numbers, mobilizations, and understanding of the political contexts represents much more. Latino youth activists countered the dominant racial framing and challenged it through their actions, for some, it sparked greater future activist.

This study also had its limitations, a) the sample size of twenty-four will not tell us all we can and should know about the youth led movements in 2006, b) the participants were all students, therefore, we are missing the other actors (teachers, administrators, media and police). Any effort to strengthen this case study should include at least one of these groups or a comparison with other parts of the United States.

The importance of this work is not lost with time, rather it remains critical in light of events that have taken place since 2006. I would argue that this study not only documents the experiences of Latino youth activists in 2006, it also helps build direct and indirect connections to the present immigrant rights and DREAMers movement. For example, Ernesto, from San Diego, California would go onto join the emerging Undocumented and Unafraid movement (DREAMers movement). Others such as Ramona, would go onto engaging political and cultural battles in education, such as, the fight in Arizona and its criminalization of teaching Mexican American Studies (MAS) in Tucson schools. Many other participants also noted the “eye-opening” impact of their involvement in 2006, as they seek various avenues to help better their community (e.g. politics, education, labor, and research). Their efforts still needed as post-H.R. 4437

racialized legislation has advance some of the goals of H.R. 4437 on state levels rather than nationally (Arizona's SB 1070).

Ultimately, the youth of color-led social movement of 2006 dwindled and has yet to be seen again. However, from this study we know that youth of color have the ability to impact their communities, to organize sustained political actions and engage the state in resistance. Further studies on the dynamics of gender and class have yet to be explored, as well as a broader examination of the trajectory or life impacts of these movements or the activists themselves. As the demographics the U.S. continues to change it become imperative that research widens its scope of study and incorporate more critical theories.

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